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**“I like them, but won’t ‘Like’ them”:**

**An examination of impression management associated with visible political party  
affiliation on Facebook**

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## **“I like them, but won’t ‘Like’ them”:**

### **An examination of impression management associated with visible political party affiliation on Facebook**

#### **Abstract**

Unlike traditional media, our interactions with political parties via social media are generally public, subject to scrutiny by others and, consequently, a self-presentation concern. This paper contributes to theory on impression management within social network sites (SNSs) by providing an understanding of the effect of visible affiliation on page ‘Liking’ behavior in the context of political parties; specifically, the possible association with social anxiety and the use of protective impression management. We predict that while users may be motivated to ‘Like’ a political party, some may feel socially anxious about the impressions their friends may derive from this action, and so ultimately choose to refrain from ‘Liking’ the party. Furthermore, we propose a new function of ‘Secret Likes’ (i.e. ‘Likes’ that others cannot see) as a means to increase gateway interactions. A survey of eligible voters ( $n=225$ ) was conducted in the month prior to the 2015 UK general election, examining behavior associated with the Facebook pages of the two largest political parties. Results support that conspicuous affiliation with political parties indeed hinders intention to ‘Like’ political pages and is associated with social anxiety. ‘Secret Likes’ were found to be a successful method to increase gateway interactions. In addition to the theoretical contribution, implications for political party communications and site designers are considered.

Keywords: Impression management; political engagement; social networking sites; self-presentation; Facebook; politics

## **1. Introduction**

*John, aged 29 from the north of England, works as a banker in London and is yet to decide for whom to vote in the upcoming general election. Although most of his friends and family are strong Labour supporters (a center-left party), he is undecided. When browsing his Facebook newsfeed he sees an advert by the Conservatives (a center-right party) with a statement that resonates somewhat with his own views. Alongside the advert is the option to 'Like' the party. John feels motivated to click 'Like' as by doing so he will receive content from the party via Facebook that would be of interest to him in deciding for whom to vote. As his cursor hovers over the 'Like' button he becomes anxious. He worries about what his Facebook friends will think of him if they see he has 'Liked' the party that opposes their views. He decides to play it safe and chooses not to 'Like' the party but still desires a way to receive the party's updates via Facebook.*

Acquiring 'Likes' for brand pages elicits numerous advantages for organizations (see Lipsman et al., 2012). Similarly, engaging the electorate in this way affords benefits to both political parties (e.g. promoting policies, donation seeking, changing attitudes) and SNS users (e.g. entertainment, information, identity affirmation) (Hanson et al., 2010; Macafee 2013). Although some recent work has focused on political engagement and SNSs (e.g. Baek, 2015; Conroy et al., 2012; Kim 2011; Kim et al., 2013; Park 2013; Vraga et al., 2015), it has largely failed to address the important behavior of connecting and interacting with political parties, for example, in the form of 'Liking' their Facebook page or 'Following' them on Twitter, which are critical gateway steps to engagement (Sashi, 2012).

Despite the benefits, and arguably the ease with which it is possible to ‘Like’ a Facebook page, UK political parties receive fewer ‘Likes’ than might be expected given there are approximately 27 million active UK Facebook users (42% of overall population) (Fleischmann, 2015). The Conservative party won the UK general election in 2015, accumulating more than 11 million votes (36.9% vote share) (BBC News, 2015). However, the day before the election their Facebook page had only 450,000 ‘Likes’ (Rothwell, 2015). Similarly Labour, who came second with just over 9 million votes (30.4% vote share) (BBC News, 2015), had just under 300,000 ‘Likes’ (Rothwell, 2015). The stark discrepancy between the number of votes and the number of Facebook ‘Likes’ given overall adoption of Facebook suggests possible barriers to ‘Liking’ political parties. This paper examines self-presentational concern as a key barrier that may exist.

People refrain from, or feel anxious about, actions that could instill negative impressions in the minds of their audience (Leary, 1996; Leary and Kowalski, 1995). In view of the concern about self-presentation on Facebook and that ‘Liking’ a page contributes to the self that is presented (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012; Zhao et al., 2008), it follows that the choice to interact – or not – with a political party’s page is an impression management issue. Thus, it is distinct from more traditional methods of receiving party communications (e.g. newspaper, televised broadcasts), where engagement is largely private or at least not broadcast in a semi-public environment. Drawing from the vignette, John, although motivated to ‘Like’ the Conservatives’ Facebook page, manages impressions by *not* ‘Liking’ the page. This is because he is worried about the projected impressions (i.e. image) presented to his ‘friends’. Such concern about impressions is even more pertinent since the release of third-party

applications that quickly illuminate political affiliation, allowing users to “flush out friends who have ‘Liked’ UKIP or Britain First [political parties]” (Waugh, 2014, p.1).

Through the lens of Impression Management Theory (Leary, 1996; Goffman, 1973) our overall aim is to understand the phenomenon highlighted in the vignette, i.e. *why* users may choose not to ‘Like’ a political party’s Facebook page, even when they are motivated to do so. To accomplish this overall aim we address to specific goals. First test the theorized association between three constructs (see Leary and Kowalski, 1995): (1) *Projected impressions* - the perceived impressions instilled in the minds of the audience associated with political affiliation (i.e. having ‘Liked’ a political party’s page); (2) *Social anxiety* - the concern that results if projected impressions are predicted to be undesirable; and (3) *Impression management* - behavior enacted to protect against undesired impressions (e.g. intention to ‘Like’). Based on Goffman’s (1973) theorization of *region behavior* – that people are freer to behave as they wish when out of the gaze of the audience – our second goal is to test whether users would have a greater intention to ‘Like’ a political party’s Facebook page if this action remained private (i.e. not visible to others). Through this research we aim to contribute to theory and practice by providing an understanding of the effect of visible affiliation on ‘Liking’ behavior in the context of political parties. The insight gained, and design and managerial implications for increasing gateway interactions we provide, may also be useful for other organizations operating SNS pages.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First we present an in-depth analysis of related literature to reveal the research gaps, leading to the development of

hypotheses to address these. The quantitative research methodology employing mediation and within-subject tests is then outlined, followed by presentation of the results and discussion of these. Finally the paper is concluded, major implications are identified, and limitations are discussed offering future research directions.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 Impression Management and Social anxiety*

Impression Management is the process whereby individuals attempt to control the image they project to others (i.e. their self-presentation), to instill a desired impression (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). This endeavor is motivated by possible social/economic gains or losses and self-esteem, and to support a desired identity or avoid one that is undesired (Leary, 1996). Events that challenge the projection of a desired image are known as *self-presentational predicaments* (e.g. falling over in public) and are accompanied by social anxiety (Leary and Kowalski, 1995).

Social anxiety describes the cognitive and affective responses that arise from the prospect of negative interpersonal evaluation in the presence of a potential or actual audience (Schlenker and Leary, 1982); hence it is different to other forms of anxiety that are not inextricably linked with social interaction. When self-presenters believe they have fallen below the perceived standards of their audience, social anxiety will arise, which leads to impression management to reconcile the discrepancy (Arkin and Sheppard, 1990). Furthermore, the size of the discrepancy (i.e. between the actual or potential undesired image and the one which is desired) is positively related to the magnitude of social anxiety felt and, thus, the motivation to manage the predicament (Leary, 1996).

Impression management to resolve self-presentational predicament has been categorized as either defensive or protective (Schütz, 1998a). The former is enacted when negative impressions have already been instilled (e.g. apologies), whereas the latter is used to avoid potential negative impressions (e.g. choosing to be quiet). Such forms of impression management have been reported to be used by both politicians and electorates as they aim to maintain the projection of their desired ‘political self’ (Kubal, 1998; Schütz, 1998b).

## *2.2 Managing impressions on SNS*

SNSs are novel environments for self-presentation and draw much scholarly attention (e.g. Lang and Barton, 2015; Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014; Wohn and Spottswood, 2016). Crucially they provide a wealth of new technologies which can be used to sustain, maintain and challenge the creation of desired online personas (see Hollenbeck and Katia, 2011; Zhao et al., 2008), one of which is visible affiliation with pages through the ‘Like’ button. Furthermore, opposed to offline where audiences are largely small and segregated, users present to large audiences through SNSs that simultaneously include those from different social spheres (e.g. work, family) (see Binder et al, 2009; De Wolf et al., 2014). This has been found to be problematic as different spheres have different expectations of what is a desired impression (e.g. what is suitable for some is not for others), increasing the chance of social anxiety and the need to impression manage (see Lampinen, 2009; Marder et al., 2012; Marwick and Boyd, 2011).



To avoid self-presentational predicaments on Facebook users have been found to self-censor the posts they make, the pictures they upload or are tagged in, and the brands they ‘Like’ (See Das and Kramer, 2013; Hollenbeck and Katia, 2012; Lang & Barton, 2015). Furthermore recent research has found that users self-censor their offline behavior in fear that content will be communicated online causing self-presentational predicaments (Marder et al., 2016). While sites provide privacy settings to segregate audiences and manage content disclosure, these are largely underutilized (Marder et al., 2012) and confusing due to their evolving nature (Kleinman, 2014). The strategies discussed here are akin with Schütz’s (1998a) protective impression management.

### *2.3 Politics and SNS*

“Facebook has emerged as a powerful social-marketing and advertising platform” (Lipsman et al., 2012, p.42; see also Wattal et al., 2010). Recent political ballots have been discussed as ‘social media elections’ (Wendling, 2015), due to the profound effect these are suggested to have on political engagement. Rainie et al. (2012) found 66% of US social media users have carried out political or civic activities through these sites. In 2013 Beppe Grillo’s harness of social media helped him win more than 25% of the vote in Italy’s election, where pollsters put him at just 5% nine months earlier (Bartlett, 2013). Moreover, Ipsos Mori (2015) found that young people feel that their vote is influenced much more by social, rather than traditional, media.

There are a number of benefits for political parties adopting web technologies, such as stimulating collective interest (Putnam, 2000), mobilization of support (Leighley, 1996), and an efficient means to propagate information, values and ideology (Gibson, 2001). Additionally, SNSs are increasingly being used to forecast election results

albeit with limited accuracy (see Burnap et al., 2016). From the perspective of the SNS user a number of studies have provided motivations for political engagement; these include gathering information, entertainment, participating in groups, and interacting with likeminded others (Ancu and Cozma, 2009; Brown et al., 2007; Hanson et al., 2010).

Political engagement through SNSs has received some attention in academic literature over recent years, yet an important gateway interaction to such engagement (e.g. ‘Liking’ or ‘Following’ a party’s page) has been somewhat neglected. Acquiring ‘Likes’ or fans enables party communications to appear naturally in the feeds of the user, thus allowing for the benefits discussed above (e.g. propagation of values, cost efficiency). Marketing literature provides support for the important role of page ‘Likes’ in communicating with customers and increasing engagement (Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Dholakia and Durham, 2012). Political parties appear to have acknowledged this importance focusing an increasing budget on SNSs: for example, the UK Conservatives’ projected spending on Facebook was estimated at over £1m a year (Hawkins, 2015). However, the effect of this is debatable as Pennington et al. (2015) were unable to find a significant link between ‘Liking’ an individual political candidate’s page and political engagement (i.e. increased attention to politics, participation and discussion). This paper is less concerned with ‘Liking’ being a gateway interaction to political engagement in the broad sense discussed by Pennington et al (2015) and more about the interaction (i.e. ‘Liking’ a political party’s page) that allows visibility of a party’s content which may lead to SNS user engagement with that content and consequently with the *party* itself. While this may

be considered a sub-set of overall political engagement, this is an important distinction.

Macafee (2013) notes that the key motivations behind ‘Liking’ a political party on Facebook are self-presentation, entertainment, and information seeking, with the first found to be the strongest predictor as users viewed political affiliation as contributing positively to the projection of their desired self. Conversely, Kwon and Moon (2014) find users are cautious when making political posts, especially when their audiences hold diverse ideologies. Scrutiny of political beliefs is found to occur beyond a user’s articulated ‘friends’ to potential employers who search candidates’ SNS accounts for political leaning (see Landau, 2013).

This literature shows that self-presentation is core to the decision to ‘Like’ a political party, supporting both the premise of this research and the use of Impression Management as the theoretical lens.

### **3. Hypotheses development**

SNSs are hailed as a technology for self-presentation and, now, political engagement, although little is known about the interaction between each of these. It benefits a political party to get as many ‘Likes’ as possible as through this gateway interaction they are afforded an efficient and cost effective way to communicate with the electorate in order to influence their decisions. Though there are many benefits for users in becoming ‘fans’ (Macafee, 2013), acquiring ‘Likes’ has proven difficult for even the most popular parties (Hawkins, 2015). Given that ‘Liking’ a political party contributes visibly to a user’s online persona, we propose this may confront them with

a self-presentational predicament if affiliation is perceived as undesired by their audiences. Thus, whilst motivated to ‘Like’ a political party, users may refrain from clicking the ‘Like’ button to avoid negative approval from their peers (a form of protective impression management, see Schütz 1990a). With this in mind, we test the following relationship:

*H1a: Greater negative projected impressions related to political affiliation (IV) are associated with a reduction in the intention to ‘Like’ a political party’s Facebook page (DV).*

*H1b: Social anxiety (M) mediates the relationship between negative projected impressions (IV) and intention to ‘Like’ a political party’s Facebook page (DV) (I.e. greater negative impressions lead to increased social anxiety reducing intention to ‘Like’).*

When actions are not visible to an audience, and thereby not susceptible to scrutiny, impression management is not a concern (Goffman 1973; Leary, 1995). Thus, it follows that users will be more inclined to ‘Like’ a political party if doing so is secret, as this would not contribute to their self-presentation. We propose ‘Secret Like’ as a new function to address the issue of self-presentational concern, giving users the option to make their ‘Like’ secret both at the initial time of ‘Liking’ and after a page is ‘Liked’. Currently, Facebook privacy settings allow a user to make all pages private but not individually (discussed in more detail later in the paper). To examine the proposed ‘Secret Like’ function we will test the following hypothesis:

*H2: Intention to 'Like' a political party's Facebook page will be greater when it is secret (not visible to others) compared with the status quo (visible to others).*

#### **4. Methods**

An online survey was used to test the hypotheses, which adopted purposeful sampling of eligible voters in the 2015 UK general election that were also Facebook users.

Participants were recruited through links to the survey in discussions on social media platforms that were initiated by national news brands (e.g. The Times, Guardian), as well as email lists and social media accounts associated with three Universities in England, Scotland and Wales. A small monetary donation to one of three well known charities was offered to incentivize participation. Recruitment started four weeks before the 7<sup>th</sup> of May election and ended one week before the polls.

##### *4.1 Measures*

To test H1a & H1b it was necessary to measure the *projected image* 'Liking' a party would give to others, associated *social anxiety*, and the participant's *intention to 'Like'* the respective party's Facebook page. These constructs were measured for both the Conservative and Labour parties and the order of presentation was randomized. However, if a party was already 'Liked' on Facebook by a participant, then the questions related to this party were skipped. Hereafter, when a measured construct is reported the Cronbach's alpha scores are presented for the Conservative and Labour parties, respectively. Appendix 1 provides details of the measures including specific questions, items, descriptive statistics and factor loadings.

To measure *projected impressions* the following question was used, “imagine the scenario where you have 'Liked' [political party's] Facebook page and evidence of this has become visible to your Facebook 'friends'. Please indicate along the scale what image of yourself you consider this would portray to others”. A five-item, 7-point scale (e.g. desired-undesired) was employed [ $\alpha=.92; .95$ ], adapted from Ajzen and Driver (1992). *Social anxiety*, was assessed using a four-item, 7-point scale (e.g. Calm-Tense), [ $\alpha=.92; .92$ ], adapted from Feldman (1995). *Intention to 'Like'* was measured under two conditions: first, the real life visible circumstance whereby “When you click 'Like' on the [political party's] Facebook page it will be visible to your friends”. This was used to address H1a. Second, the hypothetical situation where the 'Like' would remain 'Secret' thus, “would NOT be made visible to your Facebook friends”. Simultaneously with the first condition, this was used to address H2. The order of these conditions was randomized, and a verification question was added to each condition to ascertain whether or not participants had answered the question under the correct premise. The *intention to 'Like'* measure comprised a two-item, 7-point scale (Very Unlikely – Very Likely), [ $\alpha_{(visible)}=.82; .87; \alpha_{(secret)}=.91; .87$ ], adapted from Bosnjak and Rudolph (2008). Factor analysis confirmed convergent and discriminant validity of the scales, with factor loadings greater than .50 and absence of cross-loadings (Appendix 1) (Hair et al., 2006).

It was imperative that participants were motivated to some extent to 'Like' the political pages. If they were not it cannot be claimed that impression management concerns constrained their intention to 'Like', as arguably there would be no motivation to 'Like' in the first place. Thus *motivation* to like each political page was measured using a ten-item measure with a 7-point Likert scale (strongly disagree –

strongly agree), adapted from Hanson et al (2010) (Appendix 2). As this measure was used to qualify respondents as either somewhat motivated (mean score >1) or having no motivation (mean score=1) tests for validity and reliability are not required.

Furthermore, participants were asked if any privacy settings employed restricted the visibility of pages they 'Liked' to their 'friends'. Last, Mehrabian's (1996) *political orientation* (Conservatism – Liberalism) scale was adopted to ascertain the orientation of participants, and used a seven-item, 7-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree) [ $\alpha=.90$ ].

## **5. Results**

The mean age of the sample ( $n=225$ ) was 28.4 years (S.D=10.5) and comprised 57% females, with 42% residing in England, 42% Scotland, 11% Wales, 2% Northern Ireland, and 3% expatriates. With regard to occupation, 42% were in full-time work whereas 47% were in full-time education. Overall the sample had a slight liberal bias (political orientation scale mean=4.67). The mean scores further supported this as the perceived projected impressions were worse if participants were seen to 'Like' the Conservative's page rather than Labour's (in the visible condition). Additionally, 19 participants reported having 'Liked' Labour's Facebook page, and 18 had 'Liked' the Conservatives' page, these were thus excluded from further analysis. Participants (Conservatives,  $n=9$ ; Labour,  $n=4$ ) were also excluded from a particular analysis as their mean motivation score associated with the focal party was equal to one (i.e. they strongly disagreed that they would receive benefit from 'Liking' the party's page). Seven participants reported employing privacy settings to limit others from viewing their page 'Likes' and were removed. Last, the 'Like' condition verification questions (see above) were analyzed and participants who failed the manipulation check were

removed from the sample ( $n=22$ ). After necessary exclusions the data included 156 responses for the Conservative party analysis and 162 for the Labour party analysis.

### 5.1 Hypotheses testing

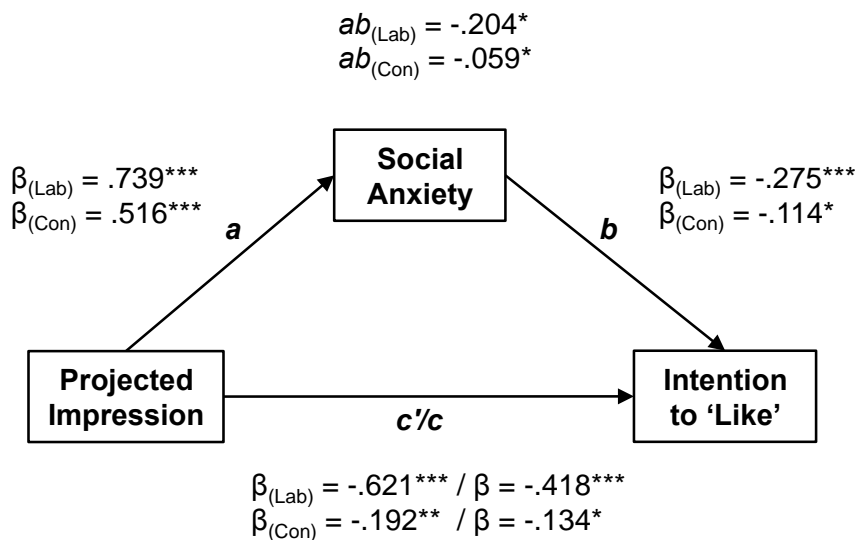
The Preacher and Hayes (2008) model of bootstrapped mediation was used to test whether increased negative perceived impressions relating to political affiliation (IV) is associated with a reduction in intention to 'Like' a political party (DV; H1a), and whether social anxiety mediates this relationship (M; H1b). The DV was measured on the premise that the 'Like' would be visible (Scenario 1). The hypothesized relationships were tested as one-tailed, while the covariates where directional relationships are not hypothesized are tested as two-tailed. The Preacher and Hayes (2008) model is well supported within the Information Systems discipline (see Kim and Park, 2011; Peñarroja et al, 2015). This model assesses the effect and significance of the indirect path ( $ab$ ) through a bootstrapped confidence interval (see Zhao et al., 2009), the significance of which is indicated by the upper and lower confidence intervals not crossing zero.

For mediation to exist the only necessary condition is significance of the indirect path ( $ab$ ), and is labeled *indirect-only mediation*. For this to occur the *direct* path ( $c$ ) is non-significant, meaning the pathway between the IV (X) and DV (Y) can only exist through the mediator (Zhao et al., 2009). However, *complementary mediation* exists when the significant presence of the mediator (M) reduces the effect of the pathway between the IV (X) and DV (Y), but does not diminish the effect to non-significance. In addition the effects of pathways  $ab$ , and  $c$  must be in the same direction. In complementary mediation, a mediator is identified, but potential further mediators



exist (for thorough details on the classification of mediation analyses see Zhao et al., 2009).

Two mediations were tested, one for each political party (see Figure 1). Bootstrap resampling was set to 10,000. Political orientation and age were entered as covariates. Gender was considered however prior correlation analysis provided no support for significant direct relationships with variables within the model ( $p > .05$ ), therefore was not included.



<sup>†</sup>n.s.; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Figure 1. Mediation pathway results

Higher scores for projected impressions indicate that the projected image is perceived to be more negative (i.e. undesired). For both the Conservatives ( $n=156$ ,  $R^2_{(Total)}=.316$ ,  $F=23.378$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2_{(direct)}=.331$ ,  $F=18.683$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Labour ( $n=162$ ,  $R^2_{(Total)}=.218$ ,  $F=14.691$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2_{(direct)}=.267$ ,  $F=14.283$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a complementary mediation was established (see Figure 1). Thus when the action of 'Liking' the party's

Facebook page is visible to others, more negative *projected impressions* associated with the political party leads to a reduced *intention to 'Like'* their Facebook page (supporting H1a); and is mediated by an increase in *social anxiety* (Conservative:  $\beta_{(ab)}=-.059, p<.05$ ), Labour:  $\beta_{(ab)}=-.204, p<.05$ ) (supporting H1b). The covariate, understood *political orientation*, was significant for both mediation models demonstrating a negative relationship with *intention to 'Like'* for the Conservatives ( $\beta_{(direct)}=-.304, t=-4.491, p<.001$ ), and a positive relationship for Labour ( $\beta_{(direct)}=.176, t=2.278, p=.024$ ). Thus, less liberal individuals showed a greater *intention to 'Like'* the Conservatives' Facebook page, and more liberal individuals an increased *intention to 'Like'* Labour's Facebook page. While this is clearly an intuitive finding given the parties' respective positions on the political spectrum, this supports the validity of our data and provides a foundation to later findings. Age was found to have a negative association with *intention to 'Like'* in the mediated model for Conservatives ( $\beta=-.016, p=.031$ ). This was mirrored to some extent in the Labour model with regards to the coefficient ( $\beta=-.016$ ), however, we can only infer that age was approaching significance ( $p=.102$ ).

Two repeated measures ANOVAs, one for each party, were conducted to examine the *intention to 'Like'* each party page under the different visibility conditions (visible vs. secret). Age was entered as a covariate. Separate analyses were favored as combined analyses would have reduced the sample size to those participants who were motivated somewhat to like both parties. The Bonferroni correction was applied. The within-subjects tests for both parties revealed significant differences across visibility conditions (Conservatives,  $n=156, F=13.85, df=1, p < .001, \eta_p^2=.08$ ; Labour,  $n=162, F=16.68, df=1, p < .001, \eta_p^2=.09$ ). The pairwise comparisons revealed that *intention to*

'Like' in secret was significantly greater than *intention* when affiliation would be visible (Conservative mean-diff=.79; Labour mean-diff=.72) (Figure 2). Age was not found to be significant in either model ( $p>.05$ ). These findings support H2.

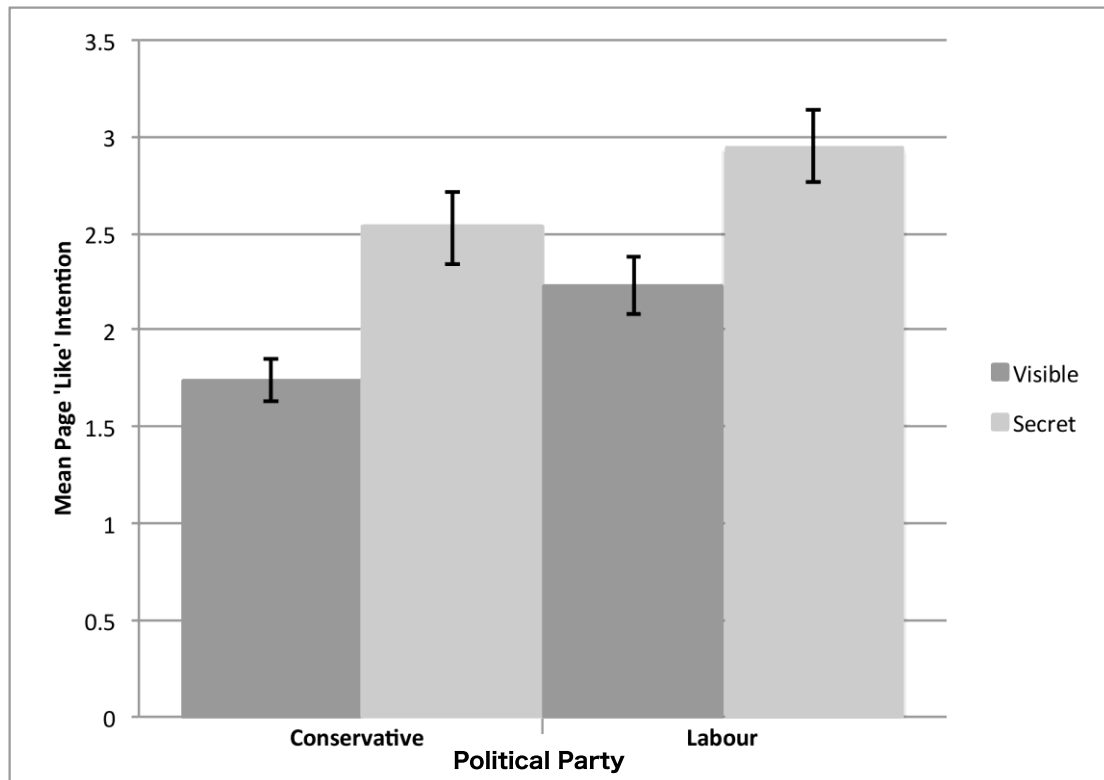


Figure 2. Mean intention to 'Like' each party's page under the visible and secret conditions

## 6. Discussion

Overall, the results supported the notion that 'Liking' a political party is of self-presentational concern for users (Kwon and Moon, 2014; Macafee, 2013). Support of H1a demonstrated that more negative projected impressions are associated with visibly affiliating with a party and a lower intention to 'Like'. Moreover, this relationship was mediated by social anxiety, thereby supporting H1b and the process outlined in the self-presentation literature (see Leary, 1996; Leary and Kowalski,

1995). This is corroborated by recent reports that young Conservative voters are embarrassed to let others know for whom they vote (see Sanghani, 2015). Having controlled for political orientation, and so to an extent the variation in intention to ‘Like’ explained by alignment of a party’s orientation with participants’ own values, the significant relationships found highlight the impact of audience standards on behavioral intentions.

This study indicates that audiences act to constrain ‘Liking’ behaviors as users practice protective impression management (i.e. avoiding visible affiliation) to circumvent self-presentational predicaments. This supports Kwon and Moon’s (2014) finding of self-censorship of political posts in the presence of diverse audiences. As did Kwon and Moon (2014), we illustrate a flipside to Macafee’s (2013) argument that self-presentation is a core motivator for ‘Liking’ a page in order to maintain or promote a desired identity; we find the same driver is also a de-motivator. This highlights the presence of both approach and avoidance behaviors (see Carver and Scheier, 2001) in political affiliation within SNS.

This research brings into contrast political communication through SNSs compared with more traditional media (e.g. newspapers, television). Traditional media afforded the benefits of political communication and the freedom to receive this largely without the scrutiny of others. However, on SNSs this is not the case, with conspicuous affiliation hindering behavior that will open these communication channels. Thus, this research provides some explanation of the differences observed between voter share for a party in the UK general election and the number of Facebook fans the party has, despite the widespread diffusion of Facebook in the

population. So whilst people do *like* a party they may not click 'Like' on the party's page due to the impression this would project to others. This phenomenon illustrates a number of challenges: for managers who wish to leverage this means of communicating with fans and followers; for users to benefit from such communication but also to maintain a desired online persona; and for site designers to help address the aforementioned paradox.

The findings suggest that older users are less inclined to 'Like' political party pages. Albeit counter-intuitive to the general consensus that political engagement broadly increases with age (Quintelier, 2007), our finding concurs with Rainie et al, (2012) who found too that younger people are more politically active through social media. However the results do not support that this negative relationship between age and intention to 'Like' is due to self-presentational concern. Specifically age was not significantly associated with social anxiety nor was it in predicting differences in intention to 'Like' between the visible vs. secret conditions. We propose two reasons why older people have a lower intention to 'Like' political pages: firstly, older users may be less motivated to accumulate new information about parties as their political tendencies become more fixed over time (Quintelier, 2007); secondly, older people are generally less active using functions within Facebook as a whole (McAndrew and Jeong, 2012).

Addressing H2, we provided further support for the self-presentational issue evidenced previously and the support for this hypothesis hints at a means to resolve this. For both parties, electorates' *intention to 'Like'* was significantly greater under the secret condition than when the 'Like' was visible. This is explained by Goffman's

(1973) notion of *region behavior*, where people are freer to act as they like once they have retreated backstage away from their audience. Providing adequate privacy and increasing interactions with content on SNSs has often been referred to as paradoxical (see Bonneau and Preibusch, 2009). Designers tread a fine line between increased visibility and content versus the privacy needs of users; our results suggest that in the context of ‘Liking’ political parties on SNSs, the status quo is suboptimal.

## **7. Conclusion**

This research contributes to theory on impression management within SNSs by providing knowledge of the effect of visible affiliation with a political party on emotion and behavioral intention. Particularly, we conclude that when visible association with a political party’s page is perceived to project a negative image to others, social anxiety is felt and intention to ‘Like’ is reduced. Akin with this, users showed greater intention to ‘Like’ a page if this was secret (i.e. no visible affiliation) in contrast to the current status quo where page ‘Likes’ are visible. Thus, our research provides a reason why even popular political parties receive fewer ‘Likes’ than would be expected. Whilst political pages were the contextual focus of this research, the knowledge and implications will be useful to any organization with a SNS presence, and specifically to those where visible affiliation may be a cause for concern (e.g. alcohol brands or Non-Government Organizations associated with a strong set of beliefs and values).

### *7.1 Implications*

Currently Facebook allows users to make pages as a whole private but not on a page-by-page basis. However, neither a blanket approach to making all pages private nor

having users refrain from ‘Liking’ pages due to impression management concerns is favorable for managers or users who benefit from this gateway interaction (see Hanson et al., 2010; Hollenbeck and Katia, 2011; Lipsman et al., 2012). We suggest that site designers consider the option to make the affiliation with individual pages private, both after ‘Liking’ and at the moment of choice (i.e. when clicking ‘Like’ on a page users are presented with the option of this being ‘secret’). Although this seems like a simple fix, there are issues that must be considered akin with the ‘value of a fan’ (Lipsman et al., 2012). A ‘Secret Like’ would exclude ‘stories about friends’ as a vehicle for sharing impressions to connections. Furthermore, under the assumption that ‘Secret Likes’ would not contribute to the total number of ‘Likes’ articulated on fan pages, lesser visible popularity may have a detrimental effect on attitudes of SNS users visiting these pages. With regards to Facebook itself, given ‘Secret Likes’ has the potential for increasing page linkages, this has the opportunity of creating increased revenue through the ‘promoted post’ function. With regards ‘Secret Likes’ the benefits and potential issues need careful consideration alongside long-term goals of both SNSs and organizations that operate pages.

### *7.2 Limitations and future research*

The present research has several strengths. First, it employed a well-established theoretical lens to understand a novel and timely phenomenon of interest to political parties, site designers and brands more generally. Second, it used a sample of eligible voters and SNS users motivated somewhat to ‘Like’ the focal party pages. Third, a stringent multi-level randomization process was used to avoid order bias but still afforded the benefits of within-subject analyses such as increased power and decreased bias associated with individual differences (see Poulton, 1982).

Despite its strengths, the research has a number of limitations offering fruitful avenues of further research. First, although social anxiety was found to be a significant mediator in addressing H1b, the effects of this were only complimentary, suggesting further research is needed to uncover omitted mediators. We suggest that researchers examine the role of ‘expectancy’ that others will actually see when a user has ‘Liked’ a party (i.e. perceived chance that affiliation will be seen; see Carver and Scheier, 2001; Leary and Kowalski, 1995) and the role of multiple audiences with diverse political ideologies (see Kwon and Moon, 2014). Second, we support the need for future experimental research that employs behavioral or physiological measures to overcome the limitations of self-report scales (see Podsakoff, 1986). Third, this research did not contend with the notion that ‘Liking’ a page is an admission of positive attitude (as the name of the practice infers); further studies should consider gateway interaction levels under different conditions with less positive connotations (e.g. when behavior is labeled as subscribing or following) as these may have a subtle but significant effect on the social desirability of affiliation. Fourth, further research should consider additional variables that may predict the intention of ‘Liking’ a political party, giving a more holistic understanding of this gateway behavior. We suggest political interest, political engagement, and public self-consciousness be considered. Fifth, future studies should investigate the likelihood and factors surrounding users’ intention to ‘Like’ more than one competing party. Last, the sample consisted of a largely university-educated young electorate from the UK, with a slight liberal bias. While limiting generalizability, this age group makes up a high proportion of SNS users and therefore insight into them is the most pressing (Duggan



et al., 2015). Nevertheless, this research should be replicated in different demographics in the UK and also with electorates from other countries.

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## Appendix 1.

Scale items: Descriptive statistics and factor loadings

<b>Projected Impressions</b>	Please imagine the scenario where you have 'Liked' [X Party's] Facebook page and evidence of this has become visible to your Facebook 'friends'. Please indicate along the scale what image of yourself you consider this would portray to others.					
	Labour			Conservative		
Items	Mean	S.D	Load	Mean	S.D	Load
1. Pleasant - Unpleasant	3.71	1.18	.87	5.15	1.48	.92
2. Positive - Negative	3.75	1.21	.87	5.22	1.49	.92
3. Good - Bad	3.62	1.13	.90	5.22	1.43	.94
4. Attractive – Unattractive	4.12	.98	.83	4.95	1.51	.90
5. Desired – Undesired	4.12	1.06	.83	5.07	1.48	.90
<b>Social Anxiety</b>	Please indicate how you would feel if your Facebook friends saw that you had 'Liked' the [X Party's] Facebook page:					
	Labour			Conservative		
Items	Mean	S.D	Load	Mean	S.D	Load
1. Happy -Unhappy	4.14	1.41	.77	5.28	1.52	.77
2. Relaxed - Anxious	3.63	1.55	.95	4.42	1.69	.95
3. Calm – Tense	3.54	1.54	.96	4.34	1.70	.96
4. Not worried – Worried	3.42	1.60	.94	4.22	1.78	.93
<b>Intention to 'Like' (Visible Condition)</b>	Scenario: Your 'Like' of the [X Party's] Facebook Page is <u>VISIBLE</u> to your friends. When you click 'Like' on the [X Party's] Facebook page it will be <u>visible</u> to your friends. Please indicate the likelihood you would do the following before the 2015 General Election:					
	Labour			Conservative		
Items	Mean	S.D	Load	Mean	S.D	Load
1. Click Like on the page	2.19	1.56	.94	1.64	1.12	.90
2. Receive updates from the [X Parties'] by Liking their page	2.28	1.60	.94	1.77	1.28	.90
<b>Intention to 'Like' (Secret Condition)</b>	Scenario: 'Secret Like' of the [X Party's] Facebook Page (i.e., <u>NOT</u> visible to your friends in anyway). Please imagine that Facebook offered a function called 'Secret Like' so that you would receive the posts from the page you 'Liked' but doing so would <u>NOT</u> be made visible to your Facebook Friends or the general public in anyway. Based on your 'Like' being <u>SECRET</u> , please indicate with					

	regards to the [X Party's] Facebook page the likelihood you would do the following before the 2015 General Election:					
	Labour			Conservative		
Items	Mean	S.D	Load	Mean	S.D	Load
1. Click Like on the page	3.01	2.01	.97	2.39	1.91	.96
2. Receive updates from the [X Parties'] by Liking their page	2.91	1.93	.97	2.49	1.94	.96

## Appendix 2.

Items and descriptive statistics for motivation to receive party content participant qualifier.

Motivation to receive party content	Do you feel receiving content about the 2015 UK General Election from the [X Party] in your news feed would be...	
	Labour	Conservative
Items	Mean (S.D)	Mean (S.D)
1. Informative	4.60 (1.47)	3.90 (1.88)
2. Interesting	4.32 (1.51)	3.77 (1.90)
3. Amusing	3.29 (1.40)	2.87 (1.52)
4. Funny	2.93 (1.36)	2.44 (1.38)
5. Thought Provoking	4.38 (1.47)	3.78 (1.85)
6. Entertaining	3.20 (1.36)	2.73 (1.40)
7. Enlightening	3.87 (1.58)	3.40 (1.74)
8. Confirmatory of your views	4.24 (1.50)	3.59 (1.84)
9. Useful	4.40 (1.54)	3.80 (1.79)
10. Revealing	4.12 (1.40)	3.88 (1.72)