

# What Do We Fear? Expected Sanctions for Expressing Minority Opinions in Offline and Online Communication

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## Abstract

This work proposes the expectation of sanctions as a promising construct to advance spiral of silence research in face-to-face and computer-mediated contexts. We argue that situational factors influence people's expectations about how their social environment would punish them should they express their viewpoint in a hostile opinion climate. These expected sanctions are suggested to explain the variance in people's willingness to express a minority opinion across different social situations. An experiment showed that the expectation of being personally attacked can explain why people are more willing to voice a deviant opinion in offline rather than online environments. Findings also revealed that in contemporary social networking websites, wherein users commonly face a personally relevant audience, people are prone to hold back their opinion as they expect losing control over the reactions of their audience. This research extends previous knowledge by presenting a more differentiated theoretical view of the fear of isolation and specifying its role in different situations of public deliberation.

## Keywords

spiral of silence, expected sanctions, minority opinion, computer-mediated communication

The phenomenon of human beings becoming silent when they are holders of minority opinions was described in one of the most recognized theories in communication research: the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The extensive scholarly

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and public interest in this theory might be due to its implications for modern democracy since the theory makes predictions about why individuals sometimes refuse to make use of their freedom of speech, which is a fundamental characteristic of democratic societies. Thus, identifying the reasons why people (do not) engage in political discussions can be helpful for taking measures to encourage them to participate in societal debates and contribute to public deliberation.

The spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993) suggests that individuals are motivated to continuously gauge whether their stance on a controversial issue corresponds to the majority opinion. If one's opinion is perceived to conform to the majority, individuals are more likely to express their stance than individuals who find themselves on the side of the minority—these might lapse into silence. Thus, the minority group, in turn, becomes less visible in public opinion over time, while the presumed majority stance becomes more and more salient. Noelle-Neumann (1974) attributed this phenomenon to the individual's fear of isolation. Humans have a fundamental need to not be socially rejected, and therefore conform to perceived social standards rather than represent a deviant perspective and risk isolation from others.

While these assumptions have been investigated, criticized, and extended by a plethora of studies over the last four decades, the theory's predictions are currently being challenged by the rise of social environments on the Internet (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Metzger, 2009; Porten-Cheé & Eilders, 2015; Yun & Park, 2011). Today, participatory websites enable a mass of people to publicly engage in topical discussions and exchange their opinions, overcoming boundaries of time and space. Given these newly emerging cultures of discussion in social media, it seems crucial to ask whether human behavior in these virtual spaces operates in a different way than human behavior in the social environments upon which the spiral of silence theory was built. First empirical evidence on the question of whether people are more (or less) inclined to express unpopular opinions on the Internet than in face-to-face communication has been inconclusive: While Ho and McLeod (2008) showed that people are more willing to express a minority opinion in a virtual chat than face to face, McDevitt, Kiouisis, and Wahl-Jorgensen (2003) demonstrated that holders of minority opinions express their opinion more moderately in a virtual chat than in offline settings. A further study revealed that individuals are less willing to express their opinion via social media than in face-to-face situations (e.g., when talking to family and friends; Hampton et al., 2014). The different behavioral patterns assessed here may be due to the different operationalizations of offline and online situations. These observations raise the question of how situational variables influence the individual's behavior in controversial discussions. Therefore, it seems that identifying the patterns that underlie different responses in different situations is a pressing challenge for research.

With the present work, we aim to provide explanations for the discrepant findings by taking a differentiated view of various social situations and linking them to a key concept of the spiral of silence theory: the fear of isolation. Given that the fear of isolation has been posited as the driving force behind human behavior in controversial discussions, we follow the argument that—when comparing a series of offline and online situations—different manifestations of this fear will be operating in terms of

expected sanctions from the social environment, thus inducing different responses (cf. Rössler & Schulz, 2014). Therefore, the present work seeks to (a) disentangle the diversity of sanctions people anticipate in different offline and online situations and (b) test whether expected sanctions and situational perceptions can contribute to explain how people respond to various minority situations.

## Expected Sanctions as Manifestations of Fear of Isolation

A key principle in Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory is the idea of human beings steadily perceiving a fundamental fear of isolation, a need to not be rejected by others, but to be popular and respected (Noelle-Neumann, 1977). This fear of isolation is seen not only as a significant driving force behind individual opinion expression behavior, but also as a trigger for macro-social processes, shaping how public opinion trends on controversial issues develop over time. Given its importance, the fear of isolation has been the subject of a series of empirical studies, with diverging conceptualizations: One school of thought has viewed this fear as a trait-like factor with interindividual variance (Hayes, Matthes, & Eveland, 2013; Scheufele, Shanahan, & Lee, 2001). This refers, for instance, to the extent to which a person usually fears being excluded from social gatherings. Empirically, the trait-like fear of isolation was shown to be (a) negatively related to people's willingness to participate in a controversial discussion (Scheufele et al., 2001) and (b) positively related to people's general tendency to self-censor in the sense of typically holding back one's deviant opinion in order to avoid negative social consequences (Matthes et al., 2012). On the other hand, scholars have also presented a situational perspective on the fear of isolation, meaning that individuals perceive a particular degree of fear depending on the specific situation in which they find themselves: In this line, Neuwirth, Frederick, and Mayo (2007) have explicitly differentiated the situational communication apprehension from the trait-like communication apprehension and issue-related fear of isolation. Empirically, they found that situational communication apprehension was positively related to strategies to avoid expressing one's opinion (the same was true for the issue-related fear of isolation) and negatively associated, albeit weakly, with strategies to engage in a discussion. Given these findings, Neuwirth and colleagues (2007) argue that measuring a state-like apprehension may "control" for situational factors that influence people's communication behavior.

With the present work, we aim to bring the trait and the state perspective together by proposing fear of isolation as a personal disposition with interindividual variance which, however, manifests differently according to the specific social situation the individual is in. Depending on the situation, this social fear might operate not only to different degrees (i.e., higher vs. lower fear), but also on qualitatively different layers. In order to elaborate on different manifestations of fear of isolation, we draw on the concept of *expected sanctions* (cf. Rössler & Schulz, 2014): When faced with a majority opposing one's point of view, an individual will think about how his or her environment would react, should he or she express a deviant opinion (Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 1999). These expectations might include positive or neutral reactions from the

social environment, but—according to the expectations of punishment posited by Noelle-Neumann (1974)—the reactions will be predominantly negative.

Previous research has already provided first indications regarding the diversity of “punishments” that people expect from their environment when they do not conform to the majority: One potential sanction mentioned implicitly by Noelle-Neumann (1993) was the fear of being judged or negatively evaluated by others and therefore losing one’s standing in a group or even in society. Yun and Park (2011), moreover, listed “isolation during the conversation, negative facial expression against minority opinions, verbal attacks [. . .]” (p. 203) as further potential reactions from one’s discussion partners. All of these potential sanctions are situation-specific reactions from one’s environment, which could lead to a sense of social isolation in the short or long term.

While several works have dealt implicitly with some of these sanctions, to our knowledge, no previous study has analyzed expectations of sanctions systematically in concert with the social situation the individual is in. The present research aims to fill this gap by zooming in on expected sanctions in face-to-face and computer-mediated discussions and testing the explanatory value of these expectations regarding people’s willingness to express minority opinions.

## Expressing Opinions in Offline Communication

In spiral of silence research, investigations into the mechanisms operating when people express their opinions on a controversial issue have mainly focused—theoretically and empirically—on face-to-face settings. Many studies tested and supported the main hypothesis that individuals are more willing to express their opinion when facing a person or a group whose opinion is concordant with their own than when facing a hostile opinion climate (for meta-analyses see Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997; Glynn & Huye, 2014). Since this significant effect is quite small, it was suggested that studies should also take into account the individual’s fear of isolation, further personality traits (e.g., shyness), or opinion certainty in order to explain more of the variance in subjects’ responses (Matthes, Morrison, & Schemer, 2010). Moreover, regarding outcome variables, the common operationalization of the “willingness to speak out” has been criticized as unidimensional, merely considering the general willingness to participate in a discussion or to explicitly express one’s opinion (Hayes, 2007). It was proposed that people may also use particular strategies to engage in a conversation without disclosing their real opinion, for instance, by expressing ambivalence, indifference, or even lying (Hayes, 2007; Neuwirth et al., 2007).

A further reason for the limited explanation of this effect of opinion climate may lie in the diverse methodological operationalizations of face-to-face situations: Most studies in the context of the spiral of silence theory employed hypothetical scenarios, asking participants to imagine a specific discussion situation and assessing whether or not they would voice their opinion in this situation. Across the body of research, participants were confronted with situations such as a train journey (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), a bus ride (Salmon & Neuwirth, 1990), a social gathering (Hayes, 2007), a

television (TV) interview (Salmon & Oshagan, 1990), a wedding banquet (Willnat, Lee, & Detenber, 2002), or a public meeting (Gonzenbach, King, & Jablonski, 1999).

Given the diversity of operationalizations, early on, Salmon and Oshagan (1990) elaborated on situational factors that differentiate these scenarios, such as the degree of publicness or the degree to which the discussants are able to react immediately. Noelle-Neumann (1993) also indicated that the size of the public and the relationship to the discussion partners might have an influence on an individual's willingness to express a deviant opinion, meaning that in front of a larger public or a greater number of acquaintances, people would be more reluctant to voice their minority opinion than in more private settings or when talking with strangers (as an anonymous public). Nevertheless, she acknowledged that the "stigma attached to an embarrassing situation involving acquaintances is not final. There is always the opportunity to rectify the impression; but there is no recourse, no way to explain or excuse one's actions, when an anonymous public is involved" (p. 215). Building on these thoughts, it seems justified to assume that contextual factors exert an influence not only on one's opinion expression behavior but also on the sanctions people perceive in different situations. For instance, a person will expect different sanctions from an unknown audience than from a group of friends after having voiced an opposing viewpoint. The objective of the present research is to consider these contextual factors in order to explain how different expected sanctions can emerge.

## Expressing Opinions in Online Communication

The proliferation of online media such as discussion forums or comment sections of online news sites initially led to optimistic views that anonymity and the lack of physical presence on the Internet would relieve people's fear of isolation, thus creating a more democratic place for discussion in which contradictory viewpoints could be expressed side by side (Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Yun & Park, 2011). Accordingly, it was assumed that people would feel less threatened by the mediated social environment, as the anticipation of social sanctions was proposed to require the physical presence of another person or group (McDevitt et al., 2003). On the other hand, it was suggested that the anonymity and lack of social cues in computer-mediated communication might also provoke an online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004), meaning that the mediated nature tempts individuals to flame or to attack others (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). If Internet users are aware of this potential disinhibited behavior online (cf. Rainie, Lenhart, & Smith, 2012), they will be more reluctant to participate in controversial discussions as they will fear being attacked by others in these computer-mediated settings.

In order to address how people's opinion expression behavior may vary between offline and online communication, it seems worthwhile to "import" variables proposed by the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 2012), which elaborates on psychological antecedents of people's behavioral intentions and subsequent actions (cf. Neuwirth & Frederick, 2004, who already combined the theory of planned behavior

and the spiral of silence theory). People's behavioral intentions are assumed to be contingent on people's subjectively perceived norm (What do others expect me to do?), behavioral control (To what extent do I feel capable to perform the behavior properly?), and attitudes (How do I evaluate the potential behavior?). Applying these constructs to the situation of expressing a minority opinion, a person's subjective norm may vary across online and offline situations: In asynchronous computer-mediated communication wherein perceived social presence of the interaction partners is reduced (compared with face-to-face conversations), people are supposed to perceive a reduced "involvement obligation" in the sense of the pressure to participate in a discussion or to defend their viewpoint (McDevitt et al., 2003; referring to Goffman, 1966). Similarly, the behavioral control might also differ between communication channels: While a person has more time to reflect on and, therefore, greater control over how he or she is going to disclose his or her argument in computer-mediated compared with face-to-face communication (Hesse, Werner, & Altman, 1988), he or she will perceive a greater loss of control due to the persistence of messages in online communication, especially in contemporary networked technologies such as Facebook (boyd, 2011). Once a person posts his or her opinion online, it can be recorded and archived and becomes, therefore, less rectifiable. According to boyd (2011), the persistence of messages in online communication "raises new concerns when it can be consumed outside of its original context" (p. 47). Attitudes toward opinion expression may be more general in nature, for instance, when a person generally believes that it is not appropriate to discuss politics or societal issues on a very public online platform such as Facebook (Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015). These psychological antecedents of behavioral intentions may theoretically explain people's willingness to express a minority opinion in different online and offline situations.

Empirical answers to the question of whether the mediated nature of online environments fosters or suppresses people's opinion expression behavior have been inconclusive: An experimental study by Ho and McLeod (2008) supported the idea that users perceive a discursive democracy on the Internet, showing that people were more willing to join a hostile opinion climate in a virtual chat than in a face-to-face setting. Other studies, however, found that people express their opinion more moderately in a virtual chat than in offline environments (McDevitt et al., 2003), or showed that people are less willing to voice their personal opinion through social media (on Facebook or Twitter) compared with face to face (at a family dinner, in a restaurant with friends, at a community meeting, or at work; Hampton et al., 2014).

One reason for the discrepant findings regarding online/offline comparisons might lie in the different scenarios that were employed. According to the characteristics of the different offline and online situations used in these studies, people might have expected different social sanctions to different degrees. In this line, Rössler and Schulz (2014) argued that identifiability can have an impact on the degree of sanctions people perceive online. Here, it is differentiated between the individual user's identifiability, meaning that a person reveals his or her identity (e.g., one's name) on the Internet, and the audience's anonymity, which refers to not knowing who the audience is (e.g., having no access to the names of the audience's members, no information about how one

is related to them or about their political position): While a high identifiability of oneself, as it is mostly given on the social networking site Facebook, is supposed to be more threatening (since one is more accountable for the minority opinion), a low anonymity of the audience is rather associated with low expectations of sanctions (since one might find the others' behavior to be more predictable). In addition, we would argue that the relationship to the audience (see Noelle-Neumann, 1993) might also be a critical factor influencing the expected sanctions. People might have higher expectations of social sanctions such as losing relationships or being negatively evaluated when expressing a minority opinion in front of a relevant social network mostly consisting of pre-existing offline connections (see Baym & boyd, 2012; Metzger, 2009) than in front of an anonymous audience in an online forum. Especially on a networking platform such as Facebook where people are networked with heterogeneous social groups reaching from close friends, family members, co-workers, acquaintances, as well as strangers at the same time (cf. collapsed contexts; boyd, 2011), it seems that considerations of the audience and its diversity (in connection with potential future sanctions) may be more important in those contexts than in situations where the audience is extensively unrelated to individuals. The fact that messages in those platforms are persistent might reduce the individual's behavioral control and additionally amplify the expectation of sanctions in the long run.

In sum, we argue that different conversational situations (be it offline or online) influence people's expectations of social sanctions when it comes to expressing a minority opinion. Despite the theoretical potential of different expected sanctions for explaining the individual's opinion expression behavior in controversial discussions, no empirical research has been presented in this respect to date. The present work is intended to remedy this shortcoming.

## The Present Study

This research aims to (a) investigate different sanctions people expect in different situations should they express a minority opinion, (b) test how the willingness to express a minority opinion varies across different social situations, and (c) explore whether situational perceptions and expected sanctions can contribute to explain people's opinion expression behavior and avoidance strategies.

As proposed in the theoretical section, the starting point for our hypotheses is that people's opinion expression behavior is contingent not only on the (perceived) opinion congruence with others, but also on the social nature of the situation. In this regard, we argue that the fear of isolation (which is the driving force behind individuals remaining silent in minority situations; Noelle-Neumann, 1993) manifests *in accordance with the social situation*. In other words, when a person is in a minority position, his or her fear of social isolation manifests in expectations of how others would punish him or her for expressing a deviant viewpoint. In order to capture the nature of different social situations and to determine how this influences the perception of social sanctions as well as the subsequent actions of opinion expression, we first differentiate between offline and online communication.

The literature review suggests that in face-to-face communication (compared with computer-mediated communication) people may perceive a greater conversational obligation, which may increase their likelihood of participating in a discussion (McDevitt et al., 2003). Moreover, in online communication, people may anticipate that written expressions of opinion are longer “persistent” and therefore less rectifiable (boyd, 2011). Considering these differences between offline and online communication, we posit that:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** The likelihood of opinion expression will be higher in offline than in online communication.

Due to the communication persistence and the large and diverse audiences in contemporary online networks (Baym & boyd, 2012), people may expect more far-reaching consequences for expressing their opinion on a controversial topic in online than in usual offline communication. In terms of negative consequences, people may find it more likely—in the long run—to encounter social sanctions in online rather than in offline environments (in the event that they voice their viewpoint). Following the idea that social fears drive people’s opinion expression behavior (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), we presume that people’s expectation of sanctions decrease their likelihood to pronounce their opinion and increases the likelihood to engage in opinion expression avoidance techniques:

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** The effect hypothesized in H1 will be mediated by the social sanctions people perceive online and offline.

Another way to define the social nature of a situation is by considering in front of *whom* a person expresses a minority opinion. In this line, one theoretical argument in spiral of silence research suggested that when there is a risk of becoming isolated from other people, some groups would be more valuable for the individual than others (e.g., Oshagan, 1996). While the classical train scenario includes an audience whom the individual will probably never see again, a social gathering involves people who are, or could become, relevant in one’s future life. In terms of online communication, the audience in an online forum might not be as relevant for an individual as the audience on Facebook, where not only close friends but also acquaintances (who could become a reference group in the future) are “watching.” Noelle-Neumann (1993) suggested that people are more inclined to keep silent when they know that it will be more difficult to rectify the impression they leave after expressing a controversial opinion. Accordingly, when facing a relevant audience in the offline realm, individuals might feel more capable of “controlling” the situation or the reactions of their environment than they do with a relevant but less visible audience on Facebook:

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** The effect of the communication channel (online vs. offline) on the likelihood of opinion expression will be stronger for people who are exposed to a relevant audience than for people exposed to a less relevant audience.



**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** Given a relevant audience, people will perceive a greater loss of control over the reactions of their environment in online rather than offline contexts and this effect will explain why people show a reduced willingness to express their opinion online compared with offline.

## Method

The present study employed a between-subjects experimental design by manipulating the social nature of a discussion situation. In the four social situations that served as stimulus, we manipulated the communication channel (online vs. offline) and the relevance of the audience (high vs. low).

**Sample.** Data were gained from a web-based study conducted with 376 participants in July and August 2014. Of these 376 participants, 11 were excluded: One participant was younger than 16 years, another participant responded to all items by choosing the lowest level of agreement, and nine participants who were in the Facebook condition did not have a private Facebook account. In the remaining sample of 365 participants (216 females), the age ranged from 17 to 68 ( $M = 25.85$ ,  $SD = 8.81$ ). About 95.9% of the sample had at least university entrance-level qualifications; 72.3% were students, 15.6% were employees, 3.6% were self-employed, 2.5% were in an apprenticeship, 1.4% were school pupils, and 1.4% were unemployed. Participants were recruited by means of announcements in German-speaking online forums, Facebook groups, or via student email distribution lists. As an incentive for participation, respondents were able to enter a lottery (after completing the study) for four vouchers from an online retail shop.

**Materials and hypothetical scenarios.** To ensure that the mechanisms observed in this study are not only valid for one societal topic, we considered two issues that we chose based on a pilot study. In this pilot study ( $N = 120$ , 79 females; age:  $M = 24.43$ ,  $SD = 6.99$ ; 98.3% had at least university entrance-level qualifications), we asked participants to rate how controversial and morally loaded they perceived eight different societal topics to be (all topics were publicly discussed in Germany, the country where the present studies were conducted). We then selected two topics that participants perceived to be highly controversial and morally loaded: (a) the legalization of euthanasia and (b) the government's surveillance of telecommunication in order to combat terrorism.<sup>1</sup>

As a stimulus for participants, the present work employed hypothetical scenarios as they are widely used in spiral of silence research. Each participant received one of four written scenarios and was asked to imagine the situation described and how they would respond to this situation. All scenarios presented a situation in which people are discussing a controversial topic and the majority of these people oppose the opinion of the respondent. The different situational contexts were a bus ride, a social gathering, a discussion on Facebook, and a discussion in an online forum. With these scenarios, we varied not only the communication channel (offline vs. online), but also the relevance

of the audience: The relevance of the audience on a bus ride with strangers and in an online forum with anonymous discussants might be perceived as relatively low. By contrast, the audience at a party with friends and people who could become relevant in the future (as was indicated in the written scenario) and the audience on Facebook, where close friends and also acquaintances could see the opinion expression, was assumed to be estimated as more relevant. In terms of a manipulation check, participants were asked to estimate the perceived relevance of the audience in every condition (item: "If I expressed my opinion in this situation, people who are important to me could become aware of it" to be rated on scale from *strongly disagree* [1] to *strongly agree* [7]). An analysis of variance (ANOVA),  $F(3, 361) = 29.27, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .20$ , demonstrated that the relevance of the audience was perceived as significantly higher at a social gathering ( $M = 4.96, SD = 1.33$ ) and on Facebook ( $M = 5.06, SD = 1.35$ ) than in the bus situation ( $M = 3.29, SD = 1.89$ ) and in an online forum ( $M = 3.56, SD = 1.84$ ). Post hoc pairwise comparisons (with Bonferroni adjustment) showed that responses in the Facebook and the social gathering condition differed significantly from those in the bus situation ( $p < .001$ ) and the online forum ( $p < .001$ ). However, there was no significant difference between the Facebook and the social gathering situation. Furthermore, perceived relevance of the audience did not differ significantly between the bus situation and the online forum.

Each of these four scenarios was created in two versions: One version comprised a discussion about euthanasia and the other a discussion about the government's surveillance of telecommunication (see the appendix for translated examples of the wording of each scenario).

### Measures

*Opinion expression and avoidance strategies.* After asking participants to think about how they would respond to this scenario, we measured the likelihood of them responding in different ways. Building on opinion expression engagement and avoidance strategies identified by previous research (Hayes, 2007; Neuwirth et al., 2007), we measured subjects' likelihood to express their opinion (item: "I would participate in this discussion and express my personal opinion."), express ambivalence (item: "I would participate in this discussion and present arguments for and against in a balanced way."), express indifference (item: "I would participate in this discussion and state that I don't care about this topic."), pretend to agree (item: "I would agree with the majority opinion in this discussion [although I have a different opinion]."), and say nothing at all (item: "I would not say anything."). Ratings were given on a 7-point scale from *absolutely unlikely* (1) to *absolutely likely* (7).

*Expected sanctions.* Measurements to assess the diversity of sanctions people expect from their social environment when it comes to express a minority opinion were developed based on a second pilot study. During semi-structured interviews<sup>2</sup> with 12 adult Internet users (age:  $M = 23.17, SD = 3.81$ ; range: 19-28 years), the interviewer asked the participant to imagine himself or herself in six different discussion situations (both offline and online) in which the majority is opposing the participant's opinion.

Participants were instructed to go through all six situations by elaborating on which responses they would expect from their social environment should they express their deviant opinion. Based on participants' statements, a pool of 32 items was constructed covering social sanctions such as being verbally attacked, personally judged, picked on, shown up, and encountering verbal or nonverbal rejection. While the first half-sentence was the same for all items ("I would fear . . ."), the other half differed, and covered various aspects mentioned by participants of the qualitative study. In the present study, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they would expect these sanctions from the social environment should participants really express an unpopular opinion in the given scenario. The items were rated on a scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7).

In order to reduce the number of items to factors, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (principal axis analysis with varimax rotation). Based on the empirical eigenvalues, a subsequent parallel analysis (Horn, 1965) suggested a three-factor solution. Subsequently, we computed a second exploratory factor analysis with an oblique rotation (principal axis analysis with promax rotation) and a fixed number of three factors to verify the factor loading of each item. To increase the validity and reliability of the concept of expected sanctions, we removed items that had a low main factor loading ( $<.5$ ) and/or a high parallel loading ( $>.2$ ) on other factors. According to these criteria, we successively excluded 19 items from further analyses. Following this, we conducted a final exploratory factor analysis (principal axis analysis with promax rotation): The three-factor solution including 13 items explained 66.66% of the variance (see Table 1 for factor loadings). The first factor, *fear of being judged*, with five items, referred to the fear of others judging oneself negatively (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ). The second factor, *fear of rejection*, comprised four items and referred to the fear of others turning away from oneself (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ). The third factor, *fear of being personally attacked*, included four items that referred to expecting others to offend oneself (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ).

*Situational perceptions.* Furthermore, we assessed how participants perceived the situation of the given scenario. The items relevant for the present study referred to how participants evaluated their relationship to the people present in this situation (cf. manipulation check) and how controllable they estimate the reactions of the environment to be ("If I expressed my opinion in this situation, I would not be able to control the reaction of the others."). Participants indicated their agreement with these statements on a scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7).

*Control variables.* In terms of control variables, participants' pre-existing opinion about the topic was measured. Building on a dichotomous variable ("If you had to decide whether to oppose or to support the legalization of euthanasia/the government's surveillance of telecommunication in order to combat terrorism—what would you do?"; responses were *support* [1] or *oppose* [2]) and participants' estimates of the current opinion climate among the national population and their personal network ("Please estimate the percentage of the national population/people in your personal

**Table 1.** Factor Loadings of the Three Factors Representing Expected Sanctions.

I would fear . . .	1	2	3
<b>Factor 1: Fear of being judged</b>			
. . . building a bad reputation	<b>0.833</b>	-0.010	0.066
. . . experiencing negative consequences on a personal and/or professional level in the future	<b>0.805</b>	-0.071	-0.073
. . . losing potentially important relationships	<b>0.791</b>	0.096	-0.131
. . . losing face	<b>0.780</b>	0.055	0.028
. . . being personally picked on	<b>0.683</b>	-0.077	0.132
<b>Factor 2: Fear of rejection</b>			
. . . being excluded by others	-0.029	<b>1.024</b>	-0.134
. . . being rejected by others	-0.086	<b>0.812</b>	0.114
. . . being avoided by others	0.131	<b>0.713</b>	0.078
. . . being ignored by others	0.018	<b>0.603</b>	0.152
<b>Factor 3: Fear of being personally attacked</b>			
. . . being insulted by others	-0.029	-0.079	<b>0.954</b>
. . . being verbally attacked	-0.143	0.083	<b>0.883</b>
. . . being attacked publicly	0.155	0.027	<b>0.702</b>
. . . being laughed at	0.100	0.129	<b>0.588</b>

Note. Main factor loadings are in bold type.

network that would ‘agree with . . .’ ‘disagree with . . .’ or ‘neither agree nor disagree with . . .’”), we created two new variables that indicated the percentage of people (in the national population and personal network) who held the same opinion as participants. Moreover, subjects’ trait-like fear of isolation was measured based on five items such as “It would bother me if no one wanted to be around me” (Hayes et al., 2013; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .79$ ).

The procedure of the study is displayed in Figure 1.

**Data analysis.** Data were analyzed with the SPSS software, Version 22.0 for Windows (IBM SPSS Statistics) using general linear models to test main and interaction effects. To test mediation effects, the SPSS macro INDIRECT by Preacher and Hayes (2008) was used. Here, 5,000 bootstrap resamples (with a percentile-based 95% confidence interval) were performed. The indirect effects were considered as significant when the corresponding confidence intervals did not include zero.

## Results

### *Effects of Communication Channel and Expected Sanctions on Opinion Expression*

The hypotheses H1 and H2 expected a main effect of the communication channel (offline vs. online) on subjects’ response strategies (expressing opinion, expressing

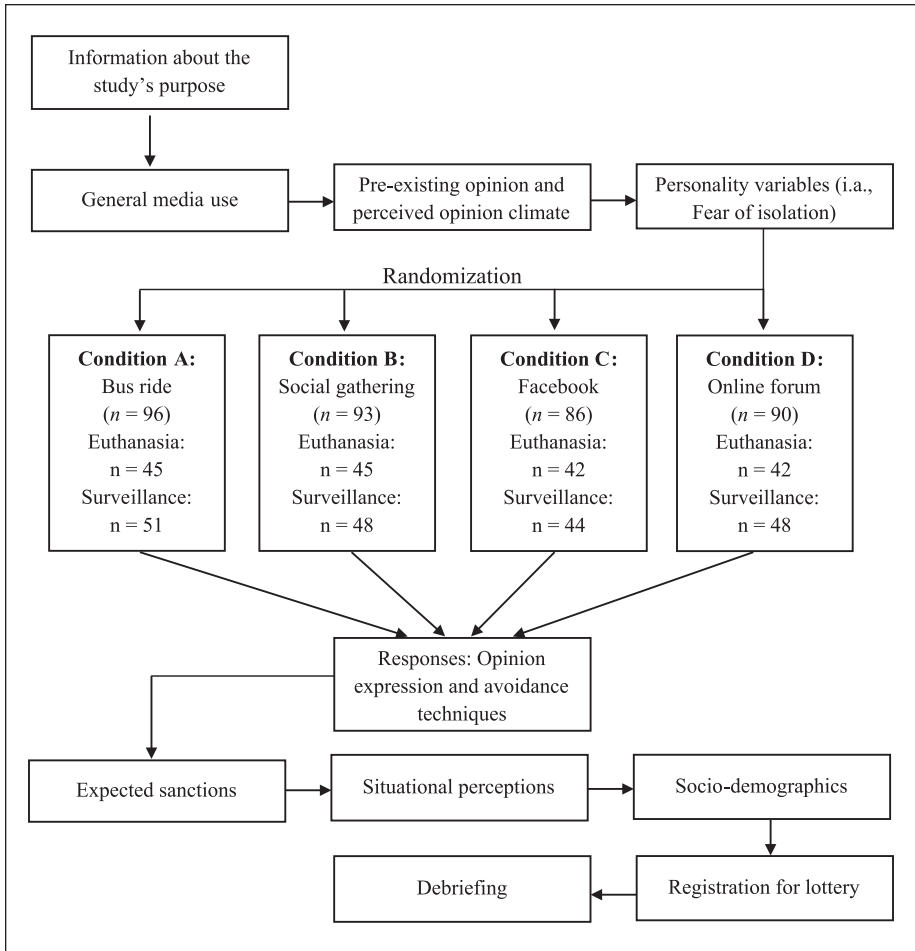


Figure 1. Study protocol.

ambivalence, expressing indifference, pretending to agree, and saying nothing at all and that this effect will be mediated by the expectation of sanctions. These assumptions were tested by computing five multiple mediation analyses including communication channel as independent variable, response strategies as dependent variables (in five separate models), and the three forms of expected sanctions (fear of being judged, fear of being rejected, fear of being personally attacked) as mediators. Since people's trait-like fear of isolation and perceived congruence with the opinion climate among the population and one's personal network were found to influence subjects' outspokenness (Glynn & Huge, 2014; Matthes et al., 2012; Oshagan, 1996), these variables were included in all models as covariates. As shown in Table 2, mediation analyses yielded a significant effect of communication channel on three response strategies:

Subjects' likelihood to express their opinion and express ambivalence was greater offline than online. Likewise, participants were more inclined to say nothing online than offline. While the likelihood of expressing indifference in offline communication was marginally greater than in online communication, there was no significant effect of communication channel on pretending to agree. Consequently, data supported H1 for the strategies of expressing opinion, expressing ambivalence, and saying nothing at all.

As a prerequisite for a mediation effect (H2), mediation analyses demonstrated a main effect of communication channel on the mediator fear of being personally attacked (which was greater online than offline) but not on the other two mediators (see Table 2). In terms of indirect effects, bootstrap results revealed that the effect of the communication channel on the likelihood to express a minority opinion decreased when controlling for the three mediators (path estimate of the indirect effect:  $-.14$ , confidence interval [CI] =  $[-.2775, -.0086]$ ). In the mediation model, however, only the indirect effect of the fear of being personally attacked emerged as a significant mediator (path estimate of the indirect effect:  $-.11$ , CI =  $[-.2448, -.0017]$ ), while the mediation of the fear of being judged and the fear of rejection was not significant. For all the other response strategies, no indirect effect through the expected sanctions emerged as significant. However, Table 2 shows that a greater fear of being judged increased the likelihood of expressing indifference, pretending to agree, and saying nothing at all. Hence, although H2 received only support for the fear of being attacked (explaining the reduced likelihood to express opinions in online communication), results indicate that the fear of being judged can also be a significant predictor for avoidance strategies.

Besides the hypotheses test, Table 2 also shows that the trait-like fear of isolation did not significantly predict any of the response strategies. Moreover, perceived opinion congruence with the national population served as a weak predictor for expressing indifference and pretending to agree, while perceived congruence with subjects' personal network weakly predicted the likelihood of expressing one's opinion and expressing indifference.

### *Effects of Audience Relevance on Opinion Expression*

The hypothesis H3 assumed an interaction effect of the communication channel and the relevance of the audience. As the manipulation check was successful (see above), we generated a new two-level variable, collapsing the Facebook and social gathering conditions representing a high relevance of the audience, and collapsing the bus and online forum conditions as a relatively low relevance of the audience. Subsequently, we tested H3 by conducting a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with the relevance of the audience and the communication channel as fixed factors and the five response strategies as dependent variables. Besides significant main effects of the communication channel, which were already demonstrated by mediation analyses (see above), the MANOVA yielded a significant multivariate main effect of audience relevance, Wilks's  $\lambda = .96$ ,  $F(5, 357) = 2.79$ ,

**Table 2.** Unstandardized OLS Regression Coefficients With Standard Errors in Parentheses for the Effect of Communication Channel and Expected Sanctions on Opinion Expression.

	Mediators			
	Fear of being judged	Fear of being rejected	Fear of being personally attacked	
	0.02 (.14)	-0.18 (.16)	0.71 (.18)***	
	Outcome variables			
	Expressing opinion	Expressing ambivalence	Expressing indifference	Pretending to agree
Offline = 1/online = 2				
Offline = 1/online = 2 (c)	-1.54 (.19)***	-1.18 (.20)***	-0.24 (.13)†	-0.05 (.09)
Offline = 1/online = 2 (c')	-1.40 (.20)***	-1.19 (.21)***	-0.24 (.14)†	-0.01 (.10)
Fear of being judged	-0.08 (.09)	-0.11 (.09)	0.20 (.06)***	0.15 (.04)***
Fear of being rejected	0.14 (.09)	0.12 (.09)	0.02 (.06)	0.06 (.04)
Fear of being attacked	-0.16 (.08)†	0.04 (.08)	-0.01 (.05)	-0.05 (.04)
Covariates				
Fear of isolation	-0.19 (.12)	-0.05 (.13)	-0.03 (.08)	0.01 (.06)
Opinion congruence NP	0.00 (.01)	0.01 (.01)	0.01 (.00)**	0.01 (.00)*
Opinion congruence PN	0.01 (.00)*	0.00 (.00)	-0.01 (.00)**	-0.00 (.00)
	R <sup>2</sup> = .18	R <sup>2</sup> = .09	R <sup>2</sup> = .06	R <sup>2</sup> = .04
	F(7, 356) = 12.52	F(7, 356) = 6.33	F(7, 356) = 4.30	F(7, 356) = 3.40
	p < .001	p < .001	p < .001	p = .002
				F(7, 356) = 12.42
				p < .001

Note. OLS = ordinary least squares; (c) = total effect; (c') = direct effect (controlling for the mediators); NP = national population; PN = personal network. †p < .10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

$p = .017$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .04$ , and a significant multivariate interaction effect of communication channel and audience relevance, Wilks's  $\lambda = .88$ ,  $F(5, 357) = 9.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .12$ . Univariate tests revealed a main effect of audience relevance on the likelihood of expressing opinion,  $F(1, 361) = 5.53$ ,  $p = .019$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .02$ , and expressing ambivalence,  $F(1, 361) = 11.20$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .03$ , insofar as participants' likelihood to express their opinion and ambivalence was higher for those faced with a less relevant audience (opinion:  $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ; ambivalence:  $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ) than for those faced with a more relevant audience (opinion:  $M = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ; ambivalence:  $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ). For the other response strategies, no significant main effects of audience relevance were shown. Besides main effects, the MANOVA revealed interaction effects of audience relevance and communication channel on four response strategies (see Table 3): More specifically, participants faced with a relatively highly relevant audience were more willing to express their opinion and express ambivalence offline rather than online. However, the likelihood of expressing opinions and ambivalence among those faced with a less relevant audience differed slightly between offline and online communication. Conversely, given a relatively highly relevant audience, the likelihood of saying nothing at all was greater online rather than offline; under conditions of a less relevant audience, the effect of the communication channel was weaker. The pattern of the means (see Table 3) indicates that for these three response strategies the interaction effect qualifies the main effect of the audience relevance but not the main effect of communication channel. For the likelihood of expressing indifference, a weak, albeit significant, disordinal interaction effect qualified the (marginally significant) main effect of communication channel: Participants reported the greatest likelihood to express indifference in front of a relatively highly relevant audience in offline realms, followed by the situations in front of a less relevant audience offline and online, while the lowest likelihood of expressing indifference was reported when a relatively highly relevant audience was present in online communication. For pretending to agree, no interaction effects were found. Consequently, the pattern expected in H3 received empirical support for the strategies of expressing opinion, expressing ambivalence, and saying nothing at all.

### *Indirect Effects of Situational Perceptions on Opinion Expression*

The hypothesis H4 predicted that the effect of the communication channel on opinion expression behavior among those faced with a highly relevant audience would be mediated by participants' perceptions of loss of control over the reactions of their environment. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a mediation analysis for every response strategy with the subsample of those who were given a scenario with a highly relevant audience ( $n = 179$ ). The independent variable was the communication channel (social gathering vs. Facebook), the response strategies were the dependent variables, and the perceived loss of control was the mediator. As a general prerequisite for an indirect effect, all mediation analyses indicated a significant main effect of the communication channel on perceived control as the



**Table 3.** Means and Standard Deviations for Response Strategies Separated by Experimental Conditions.

	Offline				Online				Interaction effect	$F(1, 361)$	$p$	$\eta^2_p$
	Audience relevance		Audience relevance		Audience relevance		Audience relevance					
	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High				
	Bus	Social gathering	Online forum	Facebook	Online forum	Facebook	Online forum	Facebook				
Expressing opinion	4.96 (1.81)	5.55 (1.50)	4.41 (1.85)	2.94 (1.96)	30.34	<.001	.08					
Expressing ambivalence	4.61 (1.78)	4.86 (1.63)	4.29 (2.02)	2.76 (1.90)	21.39	<.001	.06					
Expressing indifference	1.74 (1.14)	1.91 (1.54)	1.79 (1.33)	1.35 (0.97)	5.37	=.021	.02					
Pretending to agree	1.41 (0.89)	1.43 (0.85)	1.40 (0.88)	1.35 (0.96)	0.16	.69	.00					
Saying nothing at all	3.17 (2.00)	2.37 (1.53)	3.94 (2.05)	5.22 (2.09)	26.47	<.001	.07					

**Table 4.** Unstandardized OLS Regression Coefficients With Standard Errors in Parentheses for the Effect of Communication Channel and Perceived Loss of Control on Opinion Expression and Avoidance Strategies ( $n = 179$ ).

	Outcome variables				
	Expressing opinion	Expressing ambivalence	Expressing indifference	Pretending to agree	Saying nothing at all
Offline = 1/online = 2 (c)	-2.53 (.26) <sup>***</sup>	-2.07 (.27) <sup>***</sup>	-0.63 (.19) <sup>**</sup>	-0.09 (.13)	2.86 (.28) <sup>***</sup>
Offline = 1/online = 2 (c')	-2.34 (.27) <sup>***</sup>	-2.00 (.28) <sup>***</sup>	-0.57 (.21) <sup>**</sup>	0.04 (.14)	2.65 (.29) <sup>***</sup>
Perceived loss of control over others' reactions	-0.16 (.08) <sup>*</sup>	-0.06 (.08)	-0.05 (.06)	-0.11 (.04) <sup>**</sup>	0.17 (.08) <sup>*</sup>
Covariates					
Fear of isolation	-0.12 (.19)	-0.21 (.19)	0.12 (.14)	0.13 (.10)	0.07 (.20)
Opinion congruence NP	0.01 (.01)	0.01 (.01)	0.01 (.01) <sup>*</sup>	0.01 (.00) <sup>*</sup>	-0.00 (.01)
Opinion congruence PN	0.01 (.01) <sup>†</sup>	0.00 (.01)	-0.01 (.00) <sup>*</sup>	-0.00 (.00)	-0.00 (.01)
	$R^2 = .40$	$R^2 = .27$	$R^2 = .06$	$R^2 = .06$	$R^2 = .38$
	$F(5, 173) = 24.48$	$F(5, 173) = 13.97$	$F(5, 173) = 3.43$	$F(5, 173) = 3.45$	$F(5, 173) = 23.09$
	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p = .006$	$p = .005$	$p < .001$

Note. OLS = ordinary least squares; (c) = total effect; (c') = direct effect (controlling for the mediators); NP = national population; PN = personal network.  
<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . <sup>\*</sup> $p < .05$ . <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$ . <sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p < .001$ .

mediator ( $b = 1.23$ ,  $SE = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Effects of communication channel and perceived loss of control are displayed in Table 4. Supporting results of the MANOVA reported above, subjects reported a greater likelihood to express their opinion, ambivalence, and indifference in offline rather than online communication. Likewise, participants were more inclined to say nothing online rather than offline. The likelihood of pretending to agree remained unaffected by the communication channel. Regarding significant effects of the mediator perceived loss of control over others' reactions on response strategies, Table 4 shows that the more subjects perceived a loss of control, the less likely they would express their opinion, pretend to agree, and the more likely they would say nothing. For these three outcome variables, bootstrap results yielded significant indirect effects of communication channel through perceived loss of control. Thus, the significant effect of communication channel on the likelihood of opinion expression (path estimate of the indirect effect:  $-.20$ ,  $CI = [-.4054, -.0025]$ ) and saying nothing at all (path estimate of the indirect effect:  $.21$ ,  $CI = [.0090, .4754]$ ) decreased when controlling for the perceived loss of control. Although communication channel did not have a significant effect on pretending to agree, indirect effects are supposed to also exist when significant total effects are absent (Hayes, 2013). Here, the mediation analysis indicated a decrease of the total effect on pretending to agree when considering the mediator (path estimate of the indirect effect:  $-.13$ ,  $CI = [-.2488, -.0379]$ ). However, this indirect effect does not support the pattern expected in H4 as it was assumed that a greater perceived loss of control would increase the likelihood of an avoidance technique such as pretending to agree. As no indirect effects for expressing ambivalence and indifference were found, H4 found support for the likelihood of expressing one's opinion and saying nothing at all.

## Discussion

The current work aimed to determine which sanctions individuals expect from their social environment should they express an opinion that opposes the majority viewpoint. The concept behind expected sanctions was explored comparing situations involving face-to-face and computer-mediated communication. The results make a novel contribution to the spiral of silence research by demonstrating the explanatory potential of situational expectations of sanctions.

The starting point of our argument was that individual opinion expression behavior varies depending not only on whether a person is on the side of the majority or the minority (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), but also according to contextual factors such as the communication channel or the audience with which the individual is faced. To explore this idea, we presented participants with minority situations in order to focus on how situational variables influence their behavior. With respect to the comparison between offline and online communication, results revealed differences in the likelihood of diverse responses: People would be more willing to express a deviant opinion in offline rather than online environments. We found a reason for this effect in the sanctions expected from other Internet users: People perceive a greater fear of being

personally attacked on the Internet than face to face. Therefore, it seems that people have a lay conception of the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) in terms of expecting others to flame and insult them if disagreements arise. This finding is in line with the data provided by Rainie et al. (2012), who observed that Internet users experience insults and aggressive behavior on social networking sites. It appears that it is not necessarily the lack of identifiability but rather the mere mediated nature of online communication that leads users to expect personal attacks from their interactants. Here, people might suppose that other Internet users feel “safe” behind their computers and are more prone to attack others, no matter if they are identifiable or not. In general terms, it seems that people are better able to handle the expected sanctions in offline communication, such as being punished by nonverbal signals or incomprehension, than the prospect of being attacked in online environments. These findings, in turn, reveal that—according to users’ perceptions—the Internet is not a place of discursive democracy but rather an environment where controversial discussions can easily become personal, which tempts users to keep silent more than in face-to-face situations.

In offline communication, people are also more prone to bring up pro and contra arguments toward the topic (without explicitly expressing their subjective opinion) than in online communication. Likewise, participants reported a greater likelihood to express that they do not care about the topic in face-to-face than in computer-mediated conversations (when a relevant audience is present). These opinion expression avoidance strategies, already posited by Hayes (2007), appear to be used more offline than online. One reason for this pattern of findings can be that people might perceive a generally higher “involvement obligation” in face-to-face communication than in online communication (see McDevitt et al., 2003), insofar as they wish to keep the conversation going. In online realms, one can easily quit the platform and therefore leave the social situation when it becomes uncomfortable. These opinion expression avoidance strategies in the sense of expressing indifference, pretending to agree, and saying nothing at all were driven by the fear of being judged. Hence, if a person anticipates a risk of building a bad reputation and losing important relationships after expressing his or her opinion on a controversial topic, he or she rather engages in avoidance strategies than stand by his or her real opinion. This pattern is in line with previous research, which posited and empirically revealed a relationship between people’s fear of isolation and willingness to express their opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Scheufele et al., 2001). The present work, however, extends this state of knowledge by assuming a situational view and revealing that different situational manifestations of the fear of isolation entail different behavioral responses: While the fear of being attacked reduces the willingness to express a minority opinion, the fear of being judged stimulates people’s strategies of self-censorship (cf. Hayes, 2007). These mechanisms indicate that both, the fear of isolation and people’s communication behavior, should be considered in their different forms according to the specific situation. Moreover, our results show that a situational understanding of the fear of isolation (in terms of subjectively expected

sanctions) can contribute to explain a greater variance in people's responses than the trait-like fear of isolation. Perceived support of one's opinion in society and one's personal network, as the usual predictor on people's opinion expression behavior (Glynn & Huges, 2014), weakly predicted some of participants' responses. In comparison, situational variables such as the communication channel and expected sanctions were more influential.

The present findings revealed that not only the communication channel but also the audience seems to be critical for how people respond to a minority situation. Subjects reported the lowest likelihood of expressing their opinion in front of a relevant audience online (on Facebook), while they stated the greatest opinion expression likelihood in front of a relevant audience in offline communication (at a social gathering). Individuals appeared to perceive a higher level of control in terms of correcting the impression others form of them in a face-to-face setting compared with in front of a relevant audience on Facebook. This finding supports Noelle-Neumann's (1993) idea that expressing minority opinions in front of acquaintances might be risky; however, one might be able to re-shape the impression people had formed in upcoming conversations. This mechanism does not seem to apply in front of a relevant audience on Facebook, where people are more reluctant to voice a minority opinion. One reason for this finding might be that Facebook comprises a much larger audience than a social gathering. While a public discussion on Facebook may comprise a certain number of users (i.e., those who comment on the specific issue on the particular channel), there is a much larger "invisible" audience who can have access to this discussion, including, for example, close friends, acquaintances, co-workers but also unknown people (cf. Baym & boyd, 2012). Users may not always have knowledge about the opinion climate within this large group of people as they also do not know who ultimately will be able to see one's political expression. People might generally assume that a larger audience encompasses a greater variety of opinions and therefore a larger number of people who could contradict or form the "wrong impression" of them. In this virtual environment, users might not feel capable of correcting the impression that a large number of (relevant) people have formed of them. This pattern underlines the importance of the relational context when people have to decide whether to speak out or not. Besides relational aspects, it should be acknowledged that especially on Facebook, users might be aware that their comments will be recorded, archived, searchable, and visible to an even greater public in the long run (boyd, 2011). This awareness may lead users to anticipate future sanctions concerning, for instance, their professional life in the sense of future potential employers seeing their opinion and evaluating them in a disadvantageous manner. The role of a relevant audience appears to imply a more complex pattern of expected sanctions, which may differ significantly between offline and online environments. In this line, it seems fruitful for future research to embed the concept of expected sanctions into models of behavioral prediction (cf. Ajzen, 2012), which point to important psychological antecedents of people's actions such as the perception of norms and behavioral control that may

vary according to the social nature of the particular situation and might therefore have an influence of people's expectation of sanctions.

The present work is not without its limitations: First, this study is based on hypothetical scenarios that assess people's potential but not actual response to a minority situation. Despite the criticism of the hypothetical approach (see, for example, Hayes, Shanahan, & Glynn, 2001), we believe that this is an appropriate step to provide first systematic evidence about the influence of situational variables on the perceptions of sanctions and the willingness to express a minority opinion. We would like to encourage future research to conduct observational experiments to test whether the mechanisms observed here also apply to real situations with pressure from an actual majority.

Second, this study is limited to a sample consisting predominantly of students. In this regard, it has to be asked to what extent our observations are generalizable to other age groups and to persons with different levels of education. Since the fear of isolation as a trigger for expecting sanctions has been posited as a fundamental human condition (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), it might be assumed that the mechanism of expecting punishments for being deviant from a group is applicable throughout the life span and across persons with different levels of education. However, further research is needed to support this assumption.

Guided by the question, "What do we fear?" the present work presented a more differentiated picture of the fear of isolation in the context of minority situations: This fundamental fear appears to manifest in the individual's consciousness in more complex perceptions and expectations than previous research has assumed. Given the present findings, we would like to encourage future studies investigating the effects of minority situations to (a) elaborate more explicitly on the qualities of specific situations such as the relationship to the audience or the channel of communication and (b) associate these with people's expectations regarding how they could be treated by others if they enter into the discussion. Given that fear of isolation seems to have an explanatory value when considered in light of the particular social situation, it seems worthwhile for future research to keep on considering and measuring this construct in a more explicit way.

Regarding the application of the spiral of silence theory to online realms, this research demonstrated not only that people's silence in online environments is attributable to different expected sanctions than those in offline environments, but also that virtual spaces such as Facebook are seen as threatening environments in terms of expressing unpopular opinions, due to the unique form of social sphere. Are users' expectations of sanctions contingent on the size or the composition of the public in social media? Which strategies do individuals use to express deviant opinions in front of such a public? The answers to these questions will not only provide further knowledge about the role of social media in public deliberation but also advance the predictions made by the spiral of silence theory four decades ago.

## Appendix

The scenarios below were presented to the participants during the experiment: “Consider the following hypothetical situation. As you read through the description of this situation, imagine that you are actually in this situation as the events unfold. Imagine what you’d be seeing and feeling. Imagine the following situation:”

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Offline: Bus ride

“You’re on a five-hour journey by bus. At a rest area, the bus stops for a break and all passengers get out of the bus. In a group of passengers (whom you don’t know and probably will not be in touch with in the future), you get involved in a discussion. At one point during the discussion, someone in the group brings up the topic of the *government’s surveillance of telecommunication in order to combat terrorism*. The discussion deals with the question of whether one should support or oppose this kind of surveillance. It is apparent as you are listening to the discussion that the *people in this group disagree with your opinion* about the government’s surveillance of telecommunication in order to combat terrorism. That is, the majority in this group has a *different opinion* than you do on this topic.”

Online: Facebook

“You are browsing through your Facebook newsfeed. Here, you find several messages from your Facebook friends and from other channels you are subscribed to. One of these channels has posted a public message on *legalizing euthanasia*. Within the comments related to this message, the question comes up of whether one should support or oppose the legalization of euthanasia. It is apparent as you are reading through the discussion that the *discussants disagree with your opinion* about legalizing euthanasia. That is, the majority in this group has a *different opinion* than you do on this topic.”

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Offline: Social gathering

“You are attending a party with two friends. Here, you meet a lot of people whom you have not met before; however, you may interact with these people in the future. You get involved in a discussion with a group of these people. At one point during the discussion, someone in the group brings up the topic of the *government’s surveillance of telecommunication in order to combat terrorism*. The discussion deals with the question of whether one should support or oppose this kind of surveillance. It is apparent as you are listening to the discussion that the *people in this group disagree with your opinion* about the government’s surveillance of telecommunication in order to combat terrorism. That is, the majority in this group has a *different opinion* than you do on this topic.”

Online: Forum

“You visit an online forum in which users discuss different topics. Users usually discuss anonymously in this forum, so you are registered with a pseudonym. In a forum thread, the topic of *legalizing euthanasia* comes up. Within the comments of this thread, the question comes up of whether one should support or oppose the legalization of euthanasia. It is apparent as you are reading through the discussion that the *discussants disagree with your opinion* about legalizing euthanasia. That is, the majority in this group has a *different opinion* than you do on this topic.”

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## Notes

1. Before computing hypothesis tests, we conducted a MANOVA testing whether the topic of discussion as a fixed factor significantly influenced the dependent variables (opinion expression, avoidance techniques, and expected sanctions). Since no significant effect was found, data for both topics were collapsed for subsequent analyses.
2. Readers interested to learn the results of the qualitative interviews in more depth may contact the first author for further information.

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