

A STUDY OF MARGINALIZED NEWS PUBLICATION COMMENTERS AND THEIR  
MOTIVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF LGBTQIA+ NEWS FORUMS

By

Soojeong Kim

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## ABSTRACT

### A STUDY OF MARGINALIZED NEWS PUBLICATION COMMENTERS AND THEIR MOTIVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF LGBTQIA+ NEWS FORUMS

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The majority of news comment studies focus on elite news publications such as *The New York Times*. These studies typically arrive at one of two conclusions: (a) news comment forums are uncivil spaces and (b) White men dominate the conversation spaces on news websites. Yet we know little about how marginalized news commenters on alternative news publications' online comment forums perceive news spaces and participate in them. Therefore, 22 commenters active in commenting on marginalized (i.e., LGBTQIA+) publications were interviewed to investigate news commenters' perceptions and motivations. The Social Identity and Bounded Generalized Reciprocity theoretical frameworks suggest these news comment forums should be perceived as safer and more civil spaces due to their homogenous nature. Social Identity Theory suggests that commenters should behave in a more community-oriented way because of in-group favoritism, while Bounded Generalized suggests individuals' commenting motivations might be driven by the reciprocal expectation that in-group members will positively reciprocate their comments and support their reputational standing. The interview results rooted in the SIT and BGR theoretical lenses provided support for those commenting motivations: (1) perceived similarity, (2) reciprocity, and (3) reputation acknowledgment, which led them to perceive that interactions are civil and safe on LGBTQIA+ news forums.

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## INTRODUCTION

Hypothetically, online comment spaces offer the possibility for deliberation around numerous topics (Boczkowski, 2005). Sartori (1987) argued deliberation is crucial to effective democracy, and Peacock et al. (2019) believed a healthy democratic life consisted of political participation and civic engagement. In fact, public discourse should consist of free and respectful exchange of ideas (Sapiro, 1999). Above all, civility is a critical value of public life and speaks to “the fundamental tone and practice of democracy” (Herbst, 2010, p. 3).

Comment sections adjacent to news articles are considered a primary place for readers to engage with other news readers. Online comments allow individuals to communicate their own opinions with other people while being exposed to a diversity of voices (Papacharissi, 2004; Reich, 2011). As computer-mediated communication technologies have advanced, scholars began investigating how citizens express themselves online (Zukin et al., 2006). User comments are typically shown beneath a unit of news content and the publication’s comment forum features (e.g., anonymity, upvotes) hypothetically have an impact on the public discourse among commenters (Springer et al., 2015).

The initial hope of reviving the public sphere in online spaces, however, has dissipated due to the uncivil exchanges among commenters that take place in these spaces (Papacharissi, 2004; Coe et al., 2014; Herbst, 2010; Hwang et al., 2016; Blom, Carpenter, Bowe, & Lange, 2014; Gervais, 2015; Diakopoulos & Naaman 2011; Meltzer, 2015). It is established that news comment forums are largely uncivil based on the existing research, but the research has yet to fully investigate the causes of incivility or how news organizations can design comment spaces to be safer for commenters. Their polarizing content (Anderson et al., 2014) and uncivil nature

discourage users from leaving comments and it has also caused some news organizations to close their comment sections (Harlow, 2015; Quandt, 2018; Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016).

Historically, research has focused on how mainstream news media fosters discrimination of marginalized groups by reinforcing power groups and perpetuating racist stereotypes (Bagdikian, 1997; Campbell, 1995; Cropp, Frisby, & Mills, 2003; Entman, 1990; Gerbner, 1993). Recently, scholars pointed out that uncivil comment forums constitute a great threat to silencing the voices of women and minorities (Edstrom, 2016; Gardiner et al., 2016). Furthermore, their uncivil nature may partially be explained by research that indicates that White men tend to be not only the most active commenters (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016; Watson et al., 2019) but the most aggressive commenters (Coe et al., 2014; Masullo Chen et al., 2019).

This study investigated whether perceptions of incivility existed on LGBTQIA+ publications by interviewing how commenters from marginalized groups perceived online comment forums on U.S. LGBTQIA+ news publications. A possible reason that may explain why research has found these spaces to be uncivil is because most research on online news comments has concentrated on studying elite news publications such as The Washington Post and The New York Times (e.g., Robinson, 2010; Ruiz et al., 2011; Braun & Gillespie, 2011; Kim, Lewis, & Watson, 2018). Communication scholars have identified elite publications are more likely to be conflict-oriented than smaller news publications (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Lawrence, 2000; Patterson, 1993). Comparatively, we still do not know whether news commenters on smaller, alternative or marginalized news publications (e.g., immigrants, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, etc.) are safer and more civil spaces. Publications targeting homogeneous

groups may be more community-oriented resulting in less uncivil and aggressive commenting practices.

In this study, Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Bounded Generalized Reciprocity (BGR) frameworks are used to conceptually explore the motivations and perceptions of marginalized news commenters. SIT (Billig & Tajfel, 1973) explains why minimal groups have in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. According to SIT, categorization is a natural human instinct, and once we belong to a certain group (in-group), individuals seek to gain positive feelings from that group membership. Also, SIT posits people more positively engage with people who are perceived as similar to them, while BGR (Yamagishi et al., 1999) suggests the expectation that people will positively reciprocate their comments because they expect people similar to them to affirm their comments. BGR states that a need for reputation drives people's reciprocal behavior. These frameworks present interesting points of view that may explain commenters' behaviors and perceptions. Interviews were conducted to explore the frameworks' utility and to also explore marginalized group members' perceptions and motivation. Therefore, this study informed by these two theories investigates marginalized groups' 1) perceptions of LGBTQIA+ publications forums and 2) motivations for commenting on them.



## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Incivility in Comments on News Publication Forums**

Numerous studies have shown news commenters tend to behave uncivilly toward one another (Chen, 2017; Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Muddiman & Stroud, 2017; Oz, Zheng, & Chen, 2018; Papacharissi, 2004; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Ventura, Munger, McCabe, & Chang, 2021; Theocharis et al., 2016; Da Silva, 2013; Saldana & Rosenberg, 2020; Van Duyn, Peacock, & Stroud, 2021; Chen, Fadnis, & Whipple, 2020). Though conceptualizations of incivility vary across studies, the most popular theme is disrespectful behaviors. For example, Kim et al. (2021, p. 3) defined uncivil comments “as those expressing disrespect for someone by using insulting language, profanity, or name-calling; by engaging in personal attacks; and/or by employing racist, sexist, and xenophobic terms.” Maity et al. (2018, p. 117:2-3) described incivility as an “act of posting mean text messages intended to mentally hurt, embarrass, or humiliate another person using online devices.” This study followed Coe et al. (2014)’s definition of incivility as “features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics.”

### **Evidence of Incivility**

Comment sections may serve as spaces that fuel uncivil toward other commenters and perspectives instead of promoting respectful discussions. For example, Coe et al. (2014) found in a content analysis of discussions on online news publications comment forums that one out of every five comments demonstrated incivility. Incivility results in negative outcomes such as boosting aggressiveness (Gervais, 2015) and escalating nasty talk (Masullo et al., 2019). These behaviors then may lead to retaliation from other commenters (Chen & Lu, 2017) and negative

affective responses such as hatred or humiliation toward people (King, 2001). Incivility leads to users forming negative attitudes when individuals' ideological beliefs are targeted by other commenters (Hwang et al., 2008). In 2009, Ted Vaden, Raleigh News & Observer's public editor wrote that newspaper forums were contaminated by "racism, xenophobia and other ills of society," and the forums became "unsavory neighborhoods with language that offends the sensibilities of decent people" (Harlow, 2015, p. 22). However, Papacharissi (2004) countered most findings on incivility finding about 30 percent of messages in Usenet newsgroups were uncivil but optimistically concluded these traits "do not dominate online political discussion" because proportionately most users expressed comments in a civil manner (p. 275). Despite being proportionately low, uncivil behaviors lead to negative perceptions among those who view them such as reducing the credibility of political arguments and political trust; influencing unfavorable public perceptions of political institutions; fueling political polarization; and reducing source and message credibility (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Ng & Detenber, 2005).

Ziegele et al. (2018) noted uncivil behaviors and threats might have an impact on the diversity of voices by suppressing the voices of minorities, but research has yet to examine whether marginalized commenters feel safer commenting in forums representing their own identities. Ziegele and colleagues (2018) also stated scholars have not looked at yet why some communities develop into civil and discursive "communities of debate" (Ruiz et al., 2011, p. 20) while others are uncivil.

Brückner and Schweiger (2018) found different audiences, news presentation styles, and discourse structures may have an impact on civility. In this realm, Wright et al. (2016, p. 11) mentioned that comment researchers should consider sociological or psychological conceptions

of community building to learn about the processes that encourage respectfulness in their communication practices.

### **LGBTQIA+ Commenters**

In the United States, 7.1 percent of U.S. adults self-identify as LGBTQIA+, 86.3 percent as straight or heterosexual, and 6.6 percent did not choose to identify (Gallup, 2022).

LGBTQIA+ refers Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (one's sexual or gender identity), Intersex, and Asexual/Aromantic/Agender. LGBTQIA+ may be considered a marginalized group within a society because of not only their population size but also their identification as a peripheral sociological group. Cyrus (2017) stated marginalized groups are defined as, "treat[ing] (a person, group, or concept) as insignificant or peripheral" (p. 195).

The smaller, more homogenous nature of the group, however, may encourage social bonding among LGBTQIA+ members (Stets & Burke, 2000). It is predicted that online comment forums may offer a safer space for LGBTQIA+ users to communicate and discuss news topics (Campbell, 2014). The interactions may even be beneficial for the user's psychological well-being (Wakeford, 2002). Online spaces have multiple functions for LGBTQIA+ individuals such as expressing, constructing, and managing identity (Fox & Warber, 2015; Gudelunas, 2012; Laukkanen, 2007) and participating in social activism (Cooper & Dzara, 2010). The LGBTQIA+ community members often face an internal conflict regarding when and whether to disclose their identity (Fox & Ralston, 2016), however, LGBTQIA+ online comment forums may provide them a comfortable space to express themselves.

Therefore, it is expected that online commenters who identify as LGBTQIA+ on LGBTQIA+ publications may perceive them as safer and more civil. These perceptions may

lead them to feel more at ease when expressing themselves in online settings (Laukkanen, 2007; Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Gudelunas, 2012).

### **Commenting Motivations**

This study investigated what motivates news commenters to comment on alternative news publications' comments forums through the concept of motivations. Motivations are the general dispositions that encourage people to behave in a way in order to fulfill a need (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Mitchell (1982) defined motivations as “the degree to which an individual wants and chooses to engage in certain specified behaviors” (p. 82). Based on the general definition, when focused on commenting, individuals who leave comments on news forums do so for many reasons (Stroud et al., 2016): to express an emotion or an opinion, to add information, to take part in the debate, and to discuss with others. In their study, those who commented about their neighborhood or community were more likely to comment to share an experience, be part of the community, or show sympathy compared to those who comment on general American politics.

Previous research about comment sections on elite news publications has examined users' motivations based on Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G) (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Springer et al., 2015; Stroud et al., 2016). According to U&G theory, media use is tied with individuals' motivations, needs, and gratifications (Blumler & Katz, 1974). Springer et al. (2015) summarized four dimensions representing users' motivations when it comes to commenting: (1) cognitive, (2) affective/entertainment, (3) a social-integrative, and (4) personal identity. Overall, prior research condensed that commenters are likely to enjoy posting information to share their

experiences; ask and answering others; educate others; and correct errors of misinformation in the articles.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This study explores the usefulness of two theories that have been widely adopted in research for understanding individuals' social behavior—Social Identity Theory (SIT), (Billig & Tajfel, 1973) and the theory of Bounded Generalized Reciprocity (BGR), (Yamagishi, Jin, & Kiyonari, 1999). SIT was initially proposed to explain why minimal groups choose to engage in in-group favoritism (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). Moreover, SIT suggests people positively evaluate their group identity when compared to out-groups to support their self-esteem. In an effort to evaluate groups positively, SIT poses that people engage in behaviors that make their groups favorably distinct from out-groups. BGR, on the other hand, argues that people's behaviors are dictated by self-interest and personal reputation rather than their social identity.

At least one of these two possibly competing theories explaining social behaviors may be useful in explaining marginalized groups' motivations for commenting in this study and future studies. Qualitative research is used to explore whether these theories are appropriate to apply in these contexts because these two theories have not been examined in the context of explaining interactions on LGBTQIA+ news comments forums and it is unknown whether their main conceptual perspectives apply to commenting motivations. Thus, the present study seeks to serve as a bridge between qualitative and quantitative research by qualitatively exploring whether news commenters agree with motivations posited in each theory in the context of marginalized news publications.

## **Social Identity Theory**

At first, the minimal group paradigm (MGP) was developed to explain in-group relations. MGP has shown categorizing people into arbitrary groups boosts both ingroup favoritism and discrimination against outgroups (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Tajfel and colleagues (1971) made minimal groups free of any traits that could influence the establishment of biases (i.e., communication, prior history, similarities, conflicts of interests, and shared fate). Researchers found even in minimal groups, individuals donated more money to ingroup members than to outgroup ones (i.e., ingroup favoritism). In other words, participants favored their ingroup members over the outgroup. Moreover, people also maximized the difference in favor of ingroup members when deciding how much to donate to ingroup and outgroup members (Tajfel et al., 1971). These findings show social categorization encourages ingroup biases and favoritism.

Tajfel and Turner's (1986) created Social Identity Theory (SIT) to explain the MGP's results more specifically. SIT explains why minimal groups engage in ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination. It also explains that individuals positively evaluate their identity with a particular group because it is perceived advantageous to their self-esteem. Thus, in the context of SIT, people engage in behaviors that favorably distinguish ingroups from outgroups (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel et al., 1971).

In the context of news comment forums and their news commenters, SIT suggests that users on minority publications might self-identify as an ingroup with the other commenters. Based on this theory, the theory is explored to assess whether a news publication dedicated to the coverage of minorities will lead to the expectation that commenters perceive other commenters

to be like them. This perception of similarity might make users feel safe to comment. Therefore, they should hypothetically engage in interactions that positively reflects their identification with their group while they discriminate against outgroups. Based on this perspective, SIT may be applicable to this line of research because it may explain not only the commenting motivations of marginalized people but also can explain perceptions of their comment forums. Therefore, it is expected that alternative news publication news forums such as marginalized news publications may be more community-oriented than uncivil because audiences are likely to be more homogeneous in nature. On the basis of Social Identity Theory (SIT), this study asks the following research question:

RQ1: How does perceived similarity motivate LGBTQIA+ commenters to comment?

### **Bounded Generalized Reciprocity**

Bounded Generalized Reciprocity (BGR) (Yamagishi et al., 1999), a theory of inter-group behavior, suggests people's behaviors are guided by self-interest rather than their social identity, contradicting the premise of SIT. BGR argues individuals cooperate more with ingroup members because cooperation improves their reputational standing in the group, and a positive reputation will subsequently result in advantages received from ingroup members. The indirect benefits of reputation are group-bounded, and thus, people interact with ingroup members take action to enhance their reputation.

According to BGR's perspective, people will behave in a way that optimizes their own outcomes in comparison to the group's overall outcomes. BGR suggests that during inter-group circumstances, people will behave favorably toward ingroup members who are like them because they expect ingroup to reciprocate positive behaviors with them while they do not expect

outgroup members to engage with them as positively. In other words, people will less likely engage with interactions if they expect to encounter negative reactions from people and not further their self-interests (i.e., the Group Heuristic, Yamagishi et al., 1999). Therefore, ingroup favoritism in MGP experiments suggests ingroup members expect people to positively reciprocate with them. This expectation leads to more engagement, which may explain why marginalized groups are less likely to participate in news forums because they do not perceive those commenters to be like them.

In addition, BGR argues people cooperate with ingroup members because cooperation yields indirect benefits and reduces the possible cost of being excluded from the group. People may be more likely to meet, connect with, and gain indirect benefits from fellow ingroup members when interacting with ingroup members than when interacting with outgroup members (Yamagishi et al., 1999). In accordance with BGR, the reputational concern is a critical psychological mechanism of ingroup favoritism (Mifune, Hashimoto, & Yamagishi, 2010). In one study, however, Yamagishi and Mifune (2008) controlled common and unilateral knowledge of group membership (i.e., whether an ingroup or outgroup interaction partner knows one's group membership) in cooperative interactions and found behaviors are influenced by reputation when group membership is common knowledge (Guala, Mittone, & Ploner, 2013; Yamagishi & Mifune, 2008).

Based on this framework, reputation has been shown to be a motivation that motivates other people to comment (Springer et al., 2015). Furthermore, minority groups are more likely to feel they are a member of alternative news forums/community or have the potential to be an influential member based on BGR due to perceptions of homogenous identity in comment



forums. Since having an expectation of positive feedback from others is crucial to individuals, BGR may explain the motivations and behaviors of marginalized users in alternative news comment forums. Therefore, it is expected that news publications dedicated to the coverage of minorities will lead to the expectation that commenters are perceived to be like themselves. As such, this study addresses the following research question:

RQ2: How does reciprocity and reputation motivate LGBTQIA+ commenters to comment?

## METHOD

### Semi-structured Interviews

To date, online comments studies have focused on the commenters' motivations, demographics, commenting behaviors, etc. by mostly employing quantitative methods (Montrey & Shultz, 2021; Kim, Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2021; Paasch-Colberg & Strippel, 2021). However, this study employed semi-structured interviews because they allow the participants to express their feelings; likes and dislikes; and beliefs (Cohen & Manion, 1989). Interviews are expected to be effective in collecting experiences from marginalized groups who rarely have had their voices represented in comments studies. Through semi-structured interviews, participants can offer accounts, rationales, explanations, and justifications for their behaviors (Tracy, 2013). In other words, it is well known that semi-structured interviews allow participants to freely convey their thoughts within a certain range, so that interviewer may obtain rich and direct information (Li & Zhang, 2019). Interview questions (see Appendix A) were based on the literature (i.e., motivations, safety, civility) and theoretical intentions of this study (i.e., identifying the usefulness of theoretical frameworks).

### Sampling Procedures

Popular LGBTQIA+ online publications which have comment forums were identified using the *Muck Rack* media database, which is regularly used to identify publications (e.g., Lasorsa, 2012; Littau & Jahng, 2016; Wallace et al., 2021). *Muck Rack* has a list of the top 50 LGBTQ publications in the world, which are sorted by total visits, media type, and location of publications. Out of 50 LGBTQ publications, only publications that met the following four criteria were selected; 1) Total visits are at least 100,000. 2) Media type is online/digital. 3)

Location is United States. 4) English-language online publications. Based on this process, 21 LGBTQIA+ publications met the criteria. I selected the top ten publications based on total visits: *Queerty*, *Out Magazine*, *The Advocate Magazine*, *LGBTQ Nation*, *Them.*, *Pride.com*, *Outsports*, *Instinct Magazine*, *The Long Beach Post*, and *GLAAD*. *Queerty* had the highest total number of visits with 3,305,105 and *GLAAD* the lowest with 336,020.

I asked about people who wanted to participate in the interview about which LGBTQIA+ publications they mainly visit and leave comments. Participants mentioned the above top 9 publications in common with the exception of *GLAAD*. Additionally, from my observation, *Outsports* had a comment forum but it wasn't active (usually 0 to 1 comment in their forums) and it is focused on amateur and professional sports, not social issues. Thus, I excluded *GLAAD* and *Outsports*. Finally, many participants answered they were readers of *Metro Weekly*, so I added this publication at the end of the process. Therefore, the final nine LGBTQIA+ publications are as follows: *Queerty*, *Out Magazine*, *The Advocate Magazine*, *LGBTQ Nation*, *them.*, *Pride.com*, *Instinct Magazine*, *The Long Beach Post*, and *Metro Weekly*.

At first, I tried to recruit commenters via each comment forums, but it was impossible to reach out each commenter through comment forums. Therefore, participants were recruited from the Facebook group called "lgbtq." This LGBTQIA+ group is a public Facebook group with 6.9k members. Compared to other LGBTQIA+ groups on Facebook, these group members are very active uploading 10+ new posts every day versus the average posts (e.g., 5 posts a month, 2 posts a week, 3 posts a week according to Facebook group) from other LGBTQIA+ public groups. I uploaded a recruitment social media post (see Appendix C) and received 204 applications for participation from LGBTQIA+ people who were at least 18 years old and resided in the U.S.

commenters of nine publications were selected, and interviewees were randomly selected to begin the interviewing process.

In total, I interviewed 22 LGBTQIA+ people, which is commensurate with sample size recommendations by interviewing methodologists (Creswell, 1998 [5-25 participants]; Boyd, 2001 [2–10 participants]; Thomas & Pollo, 2002 [6–12 participants]; Guest et al., 2006 [12 participants]). Participants were readers of the: *The Advocate Magazine* (n=9), *Queerty* (n=5), *Metro Weekly* (n=2), *Out Magazine* (n=1), *LGBT Nation* (n=1), *them.* (n=2), *Pride.com* (n=1), *Instinct Magazine* (n=1), and *The Long Beach Post* (n=1). Participants' gender identities were male (n=14), female (n=6), they/them (n=1) and two did not want to respond.

I conducted the interviews in April 2022. Interviews with LGBTQIA+ news commenters averaged 45 minutes. Interviews were held through Zoom with participants' permission, audio-recorded, and transcribed using Otter.ai, an open-source tool that provides interactive transcripts in real-time.

### **Interview Protocol**

Before the major questions, the interview started with this opening question: “Could you please tell me which LGBTQIA+ publications you usually go to and leave comments on?” The purpose of this opening question was to let participants feel relaxed and comfortable sharing their experiences with commenting. During the interview, the questions were changed flexibly to respond to the interviewee's answers.

Two theoretical frameworks (i.e., Social Identity Theory and Bounded Generalized Reciprocity Theory) guided the development of the interview questions (Wilson, 2005). In addition, the interview protocol was created based on prior literature on commenting motivations

and incivility comments. The protocol contains 36 questions, which comprise four major sections: (1) motivations, (2) self-categorization/similar identity, (3) reputation, and (4) civility and safety. The interview questions were reviewed by methodological and topic experts. The in-depth interviews were conducted after I revised the protocol according to three experts' feedback. They recommended rewording questions to be a bit more open-ended to capture the nuanced reasoning of participants (Elias & White, 2020). For example, I edited one interview question like this: "What motivates you to comment on news articles?" Based on experts' feedback, the question was changed to this: "Recall the last time you posted a comment on LGBTQIA+ comment forums. What did you post about? Why did you post about it? How did people react to that post? What do you think of people's reactions to your post? ...". Participants answered sequentially to the following questions. Following the interview, participants were compensated with a \$40 Amazon gift card.

### **Thematic Coding Process**

I used QDA Miner Lite to code and organize themes. Before starting the coding work, I removed any additional identifying personal information of interviewees to ensure their identities would not be compromised in this study. Themes and categories were derived from the interviews, and they were not predetermined before data collection.

The procedure of interview data analysis involved seven steps. First, I read and familiarized myself with the transcribed data and then I read and wrote notes. Second, I used open coding to generate initial coding categories and organize quotes that belong to the corresponding categories. Third, I examined the initial categories and the quotes and reorganize them into possible themes. Fourth, I re-examined the potential themes and organized them into

broader and more abstract concepts or constructs. Fifth, I used the QDA Miner Lite to identify additional themes. Sixth, based on the findings and discussion with my academic advisor, I adjusted and refined the theme categories and tried to provide an accurate description of LGBTQIA+ groups' commenting experiences.

## RESULTS

Based on a thematic analysis of LGBTQIA+ commenters who comment on LGBTQIA+ publications, the results showed most participants felt news commenting spaces were civil and safe (n=20) and their motivations to comment were based on *perceived similarity* (n=18) and *reciprocity* (n=14), while *reputation* (n=7) was not as prominent as a motivation.

The core question investigated in this study was LGBTQIA+ individuals' commenting motivations. The findings indicated that *perceived similarity*, *reciprocity*, and *reputation acknowledgment* motivated them to comment on LGBTQIA+ news forums.

### Similarity

RQ1 asked does perceived similarity motivate LGBTQIA+ commenters to comment. Eighteen of the 22 participants said they felt similarities with other commenters on LGBTQIA+ comment forums and stated, that having similarities with members contributed to their commenting motivations. Overall, participants answered that they see other commenters in their in-group as having similar backgrounds (e.g., similar identity, lifestyles, concerns, similar interests, cultural backgrounds) as themselves. Those similarities make in-group members feel comfortable when commenting on their preferred publications' comment forums. Participants positively perceived commenters on those forums because they were perceived to be like them and they rated them as good people.

It's because there are people who talk more about real stuff, and teach me how to cope with my situation basically. A lot of people are not basically with the same identity as I am. But they identified themselves as LGBTQ. So of course, nobody knows what I'm going through. But people in *Advocate* can feel what I feel and they support me because they already went through my situation so they understand me. When we chat and agree on some kinds of stuff, knowing that they are with me, at least we were on the same page. Then I feel good...I also expect positive interactions from them because these people, we commented together have the same identity as myself (#4).

I haven't met them in person. I mean, but they are similar to me. Being together in the LGBT community, we seem to share ideas on other things generally, like economic status, and politics. We share good things and it makes me give a sense of ownership or belonging. I feel good, knowing there are some people who share my ideas. They see the same thing I see. Like we have the same mind almost. We are thinking toward the same goal. ... So, I feel good commenting, knowing that I have the same perspective as others, which leads to good intentions (#6).

I write comments when I felt a story. Or the story relates to me, that's the time that I get a reason to comment, like, if the article can relate to me in some way. Or if like, when the article that I've read has left me something emotional, like, I feel I should comment on this (#8).

LGBTQIA+ individuals probably sought out this forum because they perceived the other people as likely members of their ingroup. Their experiences in writing comments and interacting with other commenters made them feel ownership or membership, they explained. In particular, when people found that someone with similar thoughts, opinions, and experiences as them, this similarity tended to encourage them to be more active in writing more comments. Furthermore, when people felt similarities with other people, they were likely to evaluate them favorably. For example, participants described other commenters as having good intentions to help others and having good morals and ethics. Through commenting experiences on LGBTQIA+ comment forums, commentors are more likely to be active when they feel similarities with others in people in a group.

Thus, regarding SIT theory, findings in this study confirmed that LGBTQIA+ individuals are more community-oriented because they perceived other commenters are similar to them, which means feeling homogenous tendencies motivates people to comment.

**Civility and Safety.** LGBTQIA+ commenters (18 out of 22) who stated commenting motivation is similarity, also mentioned that that perceived similarities made them feel



comfortable and safe on comment forums. Additionally, 2 participants answered that they feel safer on LGBTQIA+ comment forums than other news publications' comment forums. Thus, LGBTQIA+ individuals (20 out of 22) explained LGBTQIA+ news comment forums are safe spaces, furthermore, even described their in-group members are civil and polite.

Here, I feel safe enough to comment and express myself freely. This comment forum has this kind of policy of your safety, they think people should be safe here, so people feel good and safe here where they are welcome in. People are nice...without discrimination (#6).

I feel comfortable here. Here, there are quite a few people that were similar to my thoughts. I believe that these people might be from the same racial backgrounds, or these people might also belong to the LGBTQ community. So, I know that these people have the same opinions as me. I feel, they might be grown up in an environment, which is, you know, socially welcoming for a community like, or else they might be a part of the community, who knows what hardships we need to face. So that is the reason that I can empathize with those feelings and then come in (#14).

It made me feel safe. Since I have my online friends or people that may back me up. Since I'm used to that platform...it's a bit safe when you have people like me who may back you up, feel a bit safe, and feel your sense of ownership (#18).

Participants frequently mentioned that when they are on LGBTQIA+ comment forums that they “feel cozy, comfort, safe, relaxed, and like other commenters are my family (#12).”

Two out of 20 participants stated that they also subscribed to *The New York Times* but didn't feel safe on *NYT*'s comment forums because “they can't expect what to face there (#6).” Meanwhile, they argued that they know “LGBTQIA+ commenters are not going to insult you, they are not going to abuse you (#1).”

Participants noted that they feel comfortable and safe on the LGBTQIA+ news comment forums. Overall, people who defined themselves as LGBTQIA+ tended to feel secure and safer in the LGBTQIA+ comment forums with others similar to them. Therefore, this study suggests that in-group members who perceived similarities with each other are likely to feel safe in their

in-group, which encourages them to comment.

## **Reciprocity**

Similarity is already discussed above as a crucial component of LGBTQIA+ individuals' commenting motivations. On top of that, most of the participants mentioned similarly situated people in their comment forums not only more favorably and also regarded them as decent persons. RQ2 asked about does reciprocity motivate LGBTQIA+ commenters to comment, and the findings revealed that reciprocity is highly related to their commenting motivations. The interview showed that participants answered that on LGBTQIA+ comment forums made them more favorable attitudes to others. Additionally, several participants also noted they felt the people in LGBTQIA+ forums were their family, and said they felt a strong sense of belonging. It can be interpreted that their membership makes them more reciprocal and motivates them to engage in more commenting. Clearly, a lot of interviewees stated reciprocity as a driving motivation for their commenting behavior. Because it is a community of LGBTQIA+ similar to themselves and they feel secure and protected, the commenters desire to help other commenters and behaved that they want to positively impact others via their comments. Participants evaluated positive interactions can be seen in the comment forum. This favorable and positive evaluation of the members in-group is consistent with BGR's theory.

You'll see a person has good intentions. The comment says people are open. They're not close-minded. They're comments that show support, they're encouraging, and motivating. I think that's, that's the reason what I go for usually. People do appreciate my comments. ... I see myself as encouraging people and a good influence on others (#6).

I do expect them to be polite like I do. And most of them are. I may feel safe because I can say, I did not attack anyone. And it may be different for others, but for me, I am avoiding attacking someone because I don't want anyone to confront me and start telling me such things in that way (#8).

Most of them, I think that they come from well, an upbringing background. Because like, people don't like to abuse each other in those comment boxes. They also support that means they believe in gender equality. They also believe in like, no discrimination against such communities. So, I think they come from a very good upbringing (#16).

Participants explained that they haven't met other commenters in person but they could envision what kind of people they would be. They gave a positive evaluation of the members in the group; they may have good educational background, support equality, and a good family environment and so on. The way participants look at the members in-group is consistent with the BGR theory that the members in-group give favorable evaluation to each other.

Reciprocity is also a frequent characteristic among LGBTQIA+ members. Participants (14 out of 22) were highly inclined to help, support, cheer, empathize, and unite with each other. Above all, they expected in-group members to be polite to themselves, which tended to show higher expectations than in other news publications' comment forums. There are many positive interactions mainly because they treat each other reciprocally, which encourages commenters to be more active. Overall, positive evaluation and expectation of their in-group can be interpreted as reciprocity, and it may drive them to communicate with others and can be active commenters.

## **Reputation**

LGBTQIA+ commenters (7 out of 23) cite their own reputation and the reward of feedback as a reason they post in in-group comment forums rather than public or out-group comment forums. Reputation is a well-known external incentive that encourages individuals to contribute to communities and share their expertise (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Since the LGBTQIA+ comment forum is a place where there are people like each other, and if individuals have some membership there, people are likely to comment reciprocally to increase their reputation or to

make it positive. RQ2 was about whether reputational factors can influence individuals' motivations for commenting. The findings show that marginalized individuals' commenting behaviors can be explained by BGR theory because some participants mentioned that they comment on the comment forum because they care for their personal reputation.

The fact that I comment, I post and people react to my posts makes me feel like I'm influencing I did some people say that in a way. I feel completed and satisfied. ... Their reaction, it motivates me to comment (#4).

When somebody follows up on my activities like comments or something in terms of how I had replied to a certain article, I feel happy, I feel got confident because that means someone acknowledge me (#6).

I really felt good, because I'm motivated by the reactions that people give comments. For instance, once I got this kind of comment, "That's a creative idea" So, I always post for the good. I'm motivated by people. For everyone, so sometimes I post them because I feel the commenting should benefit (#15).

I'm not a frequent commenter but I think people will recognize me, as 'my person'. They respect my ideas, and they know me. And they also know what kind of comment I will be doing on that post. ... They recognize me based on ID (#16).

Reputation is the least mentioned comment writing motive in this study. A total of seven out of 23 people said they write comments because they care about other people's reactions, or because of their personal reputation in the comment forums. People whose reputation is an important motivation for writing comments are likely to like to influence others and sometimes devoted themselves to writing comments to get a good reputation and positive response from people. LGBTQIA+ individuals usually leave comments favorably for getting a good reputation; they are willing to help group members or show a nice attitude to support them.

## DISCUSSION

Numerous participants stated they see other commenters in their group as possessing similar backgrounds and traits as themselves. Participants positively perceived commenters who have similarities and viewed them as good people. This premise is rooted in Social Identity Theory, in which people have a need for positive self-esteem, which motivates them to act in a way that maintains and protects a positive social identity. It can be explained by Social Identity Theory (SIT), suggesting that people tend to be psychologically connected to the group in which they are involved. Furthermore, participants answered that when they find some similarities with other commenters, they feel comfortable and perceive the forum as a safe space. Related to that, a lot of participants commonly stated that a safe atmosphere in their forums motivates them to continue commenting.

As earlier stated, Bounded Generalized Theory (BGR) proposes that people cooperate more with in-group members because cooperation enhances their reputational standing within the group, and a favorable reputation leads to benefits from in-group members. The direct or indirect advantages of reputation are group-bounded; hence, individuals who engage with in-group members may want to improve their reputation. Subsequently, their desire to get a positive reputation makes them behave in reciprocity.

In compliance with BGR theory, the reason people behave favorably within a group is because they care about their personal reputation. Several participants in this study also mentioned that there are people who recognize them within LGBTQIA+ comment forums, so they behave in certain ways or leave positive/helpful comments. Some participants also expressed that they liked to have a positive reputation and that makes them keep commenting. In

addition, reciprocity is a core attribute of LGBTQIA+ member forums, and it is consistent with BGR theory as well that individuals expect ingroup members to reciprocate their behavior. A lot of LGBTQIA+ individuals' answers during interviews backed up that they expect in-group members to react reciprocally to them.

Obviously, some participants mentioned reciprocity as a strong commenting motivation. Because it is a group of people similar to themselves, and they feel safe and secure, the participants want to help other commenters and answered that they would like to positively influence others with their comments. Participants were also expecting others to respond/reply positively to them as well. This point of view is consistent with the BGR theory, because BGR suggests that individuals expect their in-group members to reciprocate their actions. Therefore, it was confirmed through the interview that the expectation of 'reciprocity' and the desire to live up to that expectation was also major motives for comments by marginalized groups.

However, considering SIT theory, there is a possibility that marginalized groups' commenting behavior also can be explained by expectations of self-esteem enhancement. Ultimately, this is an empirical question that would require more work to test which theory would be more applicable. Thus, future study can test these ideas in an experiment and identify which theory will be more applicable to explaining marginalized groups' commenting behaviors.

While previous research has confirmed that the comments studies have typically one of two conclusions; first, that older White males tend to dominate comment forums in the United States, and second, that these comment forums are often considered uncivil spaces. However, the current study explored the perception of comment forums of marginalized groups rather than specific races and their motivation for commenting. This study is crucial to consider the four key

findings: (1) the marginalized groups' (i.e., LGBTQIA+) commenters leave their opinions on comment forums because they find similarities in people using the forum, (2) That similarity makes people feel safe to be active on the forum, and this feeling of safety or comfort encourages them to comment more, (3) According to the BGR theory, the comment motives of marginalized individuals can also be explained by reciprocity, and (4) Their willingness to be more reciprocal towards their ingroup members makes this group more civility. Additionally, this study confirmed the motivation for commenting for the sake of one's "reputation" – an element that has been noted in previous studies (Kuznetsov, 2006; Rafaeli et al., 2005) – and is the first of its kind of apply the BGR theory to this context. Although, it is suggested to apply SIT and BGR theories to other contexts and with other methods. The present findings offer a new perspective in commenting studies and provide support for the use of these theories to explain commenting motivations.

## CONCLUSION

Grounded in the SIT and BGR theoretical frameworks, this study aimed to examine the motivations to comment through interviews with 22 commenters who belonged to marginalized groups, especially the LGBTQIA+ community. Foremost, people rated an in-group comment forum as being safer, more civil, and more comfortable than national news comment forums. They expressed positive perceptions and expectations about the people in their in-group, and furthermore, those in-group expectations also promoted LGBTQIA+ individuals to behave reciprocally. Thus, LGBTQIA+ individuals perceive their comment forums as safer and more civil and these positive perceptions and evaluations decide them to comment more.

From Social Identity Theory's perspective, a marginalized group can be described as a social group that constantly needs self-categorization and self-identification (Harwood, 2020). For such people, online comment forums, especially if that space is populated by people similar to themselves, could be a place where continuous efforts to reproduce positive self-esteem and social solidarity are possible.

Also Bounded Generalized Reciprocity's point of view, people are likely to behave more reciprocal each other in the in-group, thus, this tendency may construct LGBTQIA+ commenters' comment forums more civil and safe spaces. On top of that, within a reciprocal group, there is a high probability of enhancing an individual's reputation. Because comment forums are not only a place where people can express their thoughts, but also a space within which people want to be acknowledged and supported to some extent.

The findings found three motivations that influenced LGBTQIA+ individuals to comment: (a) Perceived similarity: people comment because they feel similar to other



commenters (i.e., gender identity and lifestyles, etc.); (b) Reciprocity: people comment because they expect ingroup members to reciprocate positive reactions and replies; and (c) Reputation Acknowledgment: individuals comment because they want to be recognized or to gain their personal interest (reputation) within their comment forums.

This study furthers our understanding of marginalized individuals' motivations for commenting and their perception of news publication forums. The majority of existing comment studies have utilized quantitative methods (e.g., surveys) and limited their participants to a specific race (typically, White). An unfortunate side-effect of such an approach has been to center a homogenous experience at the expense of marginalized communities' motivations for commenting as well as their perceptions of virtual comment spaces. To avoid those pitfalls, this study employed a qualitative approach, with semi-structured interviews that allow for a more holistic comprehension of marginalized groups' firsthand accounts around commenting and comment forums.

To my knowledge, this study uses a new approach that not only applied SIT and BGR theory to commenting behaviors, motivations, and perceptions but also captures marginalized groups' voices. This study is significant in that it not only contributed to the knowledge of comment studies but also revealed the possibility of research on marginalized groups. To date, comment motives have been simply explained by the Uses and Gratifications theory, but looking at the marginalized community and their commenting activities with Social Identity Theory or Bounded Generalized Reciprocity theory's approach allows us to think about democracy in academia and newsrooms as well.

Online comment forums are supposed to be open spaces where cross views are freely happening. But as we see it every day, the current online settings tend to segregate people only into like-minded groups. The problem is, when they only comment in spaces where they perceive people to be like them, there will be no cross-cutting views happening. Through online comment forums, people can across others and learn from each other, but it appears to be the opposite now. From that point of view, I believe this study can provide crucial insight that prompts newsrooms and news comment forums to become more inclusive of commenters who have marginalized backgrounds.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES**

This study also has several limitations including that the findings reflect the perspectives of one group of people who volunteered to participate in the study. Among the 204 applicants, all randomly selected participants identified as African Americans. Black people make up 12 percent of the LGBT community in the U.S., which is not a large portion when compared to other races such as White (58%) and Latino/a (21%, Williams Institute, 2019). Thus, a limitation of this study is in the racial and ethnic diversity.

Five interviewees stated they felt confident that they were able to tell or guess other commenters' race by their speech patterns and expressions used. They may interact in this space because they feel comfortable engaging with this subset of the LGBTQIA+ community (Stets & Burke, 2000). Future research may be insightful to see how commenters identify that people are similar to them and how these perceptions influence their interactions.

The current study tried to capture marginalized individuals' voices compared with the previous commentary studies, but in which demographics were limited, the results of this study can be valuable data that only African American LGBTQIA+ people were composed.

Last not least, future studies can ask why some people do not comment since this study's sample is focused only on people who comment. It can be the various reasons such as because of personal preferences, and online news publications' comment forum settings.

## **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Protocol

Hello. Let me introduce myself first, my name is Soojeong Kim and I am a researcher at the School of Journalism at Michigan State University.

Thank you so much for your willingness to speak with me today.

You have been selected to speak with me because you have been identified as someone who has experience commenting on LGBTQIA+ publications. This research project as whole focuses on your experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and attitudes on news commenting forums. I am trying to listen to you about your own thoughts and perspectives, and hopefully learn from your experiences and share that anonymized knowledge with others interested in learning about commenting communities.

You must be over 18 years of age to participate. I estimate the interview will last roughly 30 minutes to one hour. If at any time you need to take a break or stop, please do not hesitate to let me know. I also plan on taking notes to help with this too. And if you are alright, I will be recording this conversation with my smartphone and my laptop. Would you mind if I recorded this conversation so I can make sure to accurately document your experiences? After this interview, I will ask you if you have a preferred pseudonym that you would like me to use so your identity will be protected.

After the recording, I will transcribe this interview and remove any additional identifying personal information to ensure your identity will not be compromised in this study. I want you to feel confident in knowing your answers are completely confidential and will be shared with no one but me. Again, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. If you feel uncomfortable at any point in the conversation, you are free to withdraw without consequences.

May I begin recording?

Thank you.

As for the consent form,

- (When the participant already sent the consent form before the interview) I emailed you earlier about the consent form and I have checked that you already signed and sent me before this interview, is this correct?

- (When the participant didn't send the consent form before the interview) I emailed you earlier about the consent form, and I haven't gotten your signature on it yet. You can verbally consent which will be captured via audio recording and you can choose to not answer any questions that do not feel comfortable answering. If you agree to the consent form, could you speak out loud the statement of consent's sentences?

Thank you.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Interview Questionnaire**

#### **Opening Questions**

1. Could you please tell me which LGBT publications do you usually go to and leave comments? (If you read/comment several, which one do you read/comment most often?)
2. How often do you read that publication?
3. How often do you post on that comment forum?
  - a. What do you like about that forum?
4. Do you post on other news comment forums?
  - a. What publications?
  - b. Why those forums?

#### **Motivations**

1. Recall the last time you posted a comment on Queerty.
  - a. What did you post about?
  - b. Why did you post that?
  - c. How did people react to that post?
  - d. What do you think of people's reactions to your post?
2. Recall the most memorable comment on Queerty.
  - a. What did you post about?
  - b. Why did you post that?
  - c. How did people react to that post?
3. What typically motivates you to post a comment?
  - a. Were there any other motivations when you posted that?
4. When do you want to leave comment, but hesitate to leave a comment?
  - a. Are there other situations in which you don't want to leave a comment?

#### **Categorize Themselves as Similar Identity**

1. When you leave comments, how do people interact with your comments?
2. What type of backgrounds do you envision that people have who comment on that

site?

- a. How similar do you think they are to you? In what ways?
- b. How does that similarity make you feel when commenting?
3. What type of comments do you usually read?
4. What type of engagement do you see among the commenters?
  - a. Do you expect positive interactions from other commentors? From what types of people?

#### **Do they Motivate by Reputational Factors?**

5. Do you see yourself as influential in comment forums? In what ways?
6. To what extent do people express appreciation for your comments?
  - a. How does that make you feel?

#### **Perceive Safe/Civil**

7. How safe do you feel commenting on this forum? In comparison to other types of news publications?
  - a. How civil overall do you perceive this comment forum is?
  - b. Have you ever had a positive or negative experience on this comment forum?
  - c. How about on others?
8. Do you feel that you are a member of this comment forums?
  - a. Why do you say that?

#### **Descriptive**

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
  - a. Name?
  - b. Preferred pronouns?
  - c. Gender identity?
  - d. Preferred pseudonym?

Thank you for participating and having a conversation with me today. Do you have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the interview process today?

If you think of any later, feel free to email my MSU email.

Thank you!



## APPENDIX C

### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

#### [An Investigation of Alternative News Publication Comment Forums]

You are invited to participate in a research study about online comment forums on alternative news publications. I am asking you to take part because you meet the qualifications; (a) LGBTQIA+, (b) having experience of commenting on LGBTQIA+ publications, and (c) a frequent or infrequent commenter.

**What the study is about:** The purpose of this study is to investigate how marginalized people perceive online comment forums on alternative news publications and their experience and thoughts. What I will ask you to do: If you agree to this study, I will conduct a Zoom interview with you. The interview will include questions about your experiences as a commenter on LGBTQIA+ online publications. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes to one hour to complete.

**Potential Risks:** There are extremely little, if any, psychological or social risks associated with this research study. Your participation is requested in the interest of science and will be of educational value. If any question creates psychological discomfort, you may skip the question or withdraw from the interview.

**Your answers will be confidential:** To ensure that our conversations are recorded accurately, we would like to make an audio recording of the interview. With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview and take brief notes while we talk. You are free to decide whether to participate further whenever you are contacted again and you may choose to leave the study at any time without any negative consequence. The records of this study will be kept private. Within me and my advisor, your real name will be used in my notes and multimedia records. However, when study results are released outside, I will remove identifying information from the data by using pseudonyms, gender, and your preferred pronouns and omitting or aggregating data about location, etc. I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a safe file on a password-protected computer; only the researcher will have access to the records. If I audio record the interviews, they will be destroyed after it has been transcribed, which I anticipate will be within two months of recording.

**Taking part has compensation:** Taking part in this study will have compensation (of \$ 40). You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with myself or the Michigan State University. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

**If you have questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Soojeong Kim. Please feel free to ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you can contact Soojeong Kim at [kimsooje@msu.edu](mailto:kimsooje@msu.edu).

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be part of the study. If you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not need to provide a reason for

your decision. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you may request that all data associated with you be erased. You will be given a copy of this document for your records and one copy will be kept permanently with the study records. Before you sign, please be sure that any questions you have about the study have been answered and that you understand what you are being asked to do. You may contact the researcher if you think of a question later.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions asked.

I agree to participate in the study.

_____	_____	_____
Name	Signature	Date

_____	I agree to be audio-recorded as part of the study.
Initials	

_____	I agree to be video-recorded as part of the study.
Initials	

_____	I agree to be contacted again in future about this study.
Initials	

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Recruitment Letter**

Hi everyone, nice to meet you!

My name is Soojeong Kim and I am a researcher at the School of Journalism at Michigan State University. I am currently studying news comment forums.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research if you are commenters on LGBTQIA+ online publications.

Participation in this study includes a one-on-one Zoom interview regarding your experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and attitudes on commenting on LGBTQIA+ online publications. This would take roughly 30 minutes to one hour of your time. After the interview, you will be compensated \$40 in gift card within a week. Your participation and input are invaluable and will greatly enhance our understanding of alternative news comment forums.

Please email at [kimsooje@msu.edu](mailto:kimsooje@msu.edu) if you are interested in participating in this study.

Thank you,

Soojeong Kim

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Message Reminder Protocol**

Dear XX,

I appreciate your participation in my study on news publication comment forums. The interview will include questions about your experiences as a commenter on LGBTQIA+ online publications. It will take approximately 30 minutes to one hour to complete. Before our meeting, I am sending you a reminder of our meeting. Our meeting will be held at 2:00 – 3:00 pm (Eastern Time), Monday, April 11, 2022 via Zoom (LINK).

I also attached Consent Form for this study. You can verbally consent which will be captured via audio recording and you can choose to not answer any questions that do not feel comfortable answering. If you are able to fill this form out, you can sign an electronic document and send me via email.

If you need to reschedule the meeting date, please feel free to reach out to me via email. Thank you again and I look forward to meeting you!

Best,

Soojeong Kim

Michigan State University

School of Journalism

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