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Who endorses online hate? The roles of ideology and knowledge in South Korean perceptions of anti-Chinese slurs

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores how political ideology and political knowledge influence perceptions and consumption of anti-outgroup content in South Korean online communities, addressing a gap in the literature on non-Western contexts.
Design/Methodology/Approach: An online survey was conducted among South Korean online community users to investigate the relationships between political ideology, political knowledge, and attitudes toward outgroups, specifically China.
Findings: The study reveals significant correlations between conservatism and positive perceptions of anti-outgroup slurs, as well as associations between political knowledge and both anti-outgroup sentiment and perceptions of slurs. Contrary to expectations, social identity and threat perceptions did not predict anti-outgroup sentiment.
Practical Implications: The findings provide insights for strategies to promote more inclusive online discourse and mitigate negative intergroup attitudes, highlighting the importance of political knowledge in shaping online behavior.
Social Implications: This research contributes to understanding how online communities influence intergroup dynamics and national identity in South Korea, offering broader implications for international relations and cross-cultural understanding.
Originality/Value: This study pioneers research on incivility in South Korean online communities, exploring the complex interplay between political ideology, knowledge, and online behavior in a non-Western context.

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The rise of online communities has created new spaces for identity formation and intergroup dynamics. These virtual environments often foster strong in-group bonds while simultaneously amplifying negative sentiments toward perceived out-groups (Postmes et al. 2002). This study aims to examine how political ideology and political knowledge influence perceptions and consumption of anti-outgroup content in online communities, specifically in the context of South Korean online communities.

The proliferation of online communities has fundamentally altered the landscape of social interaction and information exchange. These digital spaces have become integral to modern society, serving as platforms for discussion, debate, and the formation of collective identities (Bliuc et al. 2019; Code and Zaparyniuk 2010). However, the same features that facilitate connection and community-building can also contribute to the reinforcement of existing biases and the development of new prejudices against outgroups (Wojcieszak 2010).

In the context of South Korea, online communities have played a particularly significant role in shaping public discourse and social attitudes. The country's advanced digital infrastructure and high internet penetration rate have led to the rapid growth and diversification of online communities (Jin 2017). These platforms have become important arenas for political discussion, cultural exchange, and the negotiation of national identity.

This study focuses on attitudes toward China, an out-group of unique historical and contemporary importance. The country's complex relationships with neighboring nations, particularly China, have been shaped by historical conflicts, economic interdependence, and cultural exchanges (Snyder 2009). In recent years, this has been exacerbated by geopolitical tensions, such as the 2017 THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile crisis, and fierce online disputes over cultural ownership, making this relationship a fertile ground for perceived realistic and symbolic threats. Clarifying why this specific case is important for international relations is a key goal of this paper.

The role of political ideology in shaping online discourse has been a subject of growing interest. Studies have shown that political orientation can influence how individuals perceive and engage with uncivil content online (Gubitz 2022; Rains et al. 2017). Similarly, political knowledge has been linked to varying levels of tolerance and understanding of complex societal issues (Carpini and Keeter 1996; Jordan 2024). However, the interplay between these factors in the context of online communities and their impact on intergroup attitudes, particularly in non-Western settings, remains underexplored. This research seeks to contribute to a broader understanding

of how online communities shape intergroup attitudes and how individual factors such as political ideology and knowledge influence these processes. By examining these dynamics in the relatively understudied context of South Korea, this study aims to provide insights that can inform strategies for promoting more inclusive online discourse and mitigating the spread of harmful intergroup attitudes.

Furthermore, this study addresses the gap in literature regarding the role of online communities in shaping public opinion and intergroup attitudes in non-Western contexts. While much research has focused on social media platforms and online behaviors in Western countries, less attention has been paid to the unique dynamics of online communities in Asian countries like South Korea. This study aims to contribute to a more globally representative understanding of online behavior and its implications for social cohesion and intergroup relations.

By investigating how South Koreans perceive their outgroup, specifically China and Chinese people, this research also sheds light on the complex interplay between national identity, historical memory, and contemporary geopolitical tensions in shaping online discourse. The findings of this study have potential implications not only for understanding online behavior in South Korea but also for broader questions of how digital spaces influence international relations and cross-cultural understanding in an increasingly interconnected world.

1 Theoretical framework

This study proposes a cohesive theoretical model to explain anti-outgroup attitudes in online communities. This model posits a multi-stage process, arguing that broad environmental factors create the conditions for intergroup hostility, which is then catalyzed by core psychological mechanisms and filtered through individual-level differences. The framework begins by establishing the digital environment of online communities as a crucial starting point; its specific architectural features – such as anonymity and algorithmic curation – are not merely backdrops, but active forces that accelerate and intensify intergroup dynamics. Within this environment, the framework then outlines the core psychological processes that are activated. Specifically, it will demonstrate how the features of online life make the processes of in-group/out-group categorization in Social Identity Theory more salient, and how they facilitate the rapid spread of perceived threats, as explained by Integrated Threat Theory. Finally, the model considers the individual-level filters that determine who is most susceptible to these powerful dynamics. It argues that the effects of identity and threat are not uniform; instead, they are shaped by a person's political ideology, which acts as a motivational lens for interpreting threats, and by their political knowledge and education, which affect their cognitive capacity to evaluate hostile

out-group narratives critically. By connecting these three layers – the environment, the psychological process, and the individual – this framework provides a more comprehensive and integrated explanation for the phenomena under investigation.

1.1 The digital environment: online communities and intergroup dynamics

Online communities have become influential spaces for shaping public opinion and intergroup attitudes. Early scholars observed that online communities have "intense feelings of camaraderie, empathy, and support" among people in such virtual spaces (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar 2005). Other researchers operationalized the term and defined its features as where "a group of people come together for a particular purpose," and they are "guided by policies (including norms and rules) and supported by software" (De Souza and Preece 2004; Preece 2000). Sociability, which is about "social interactions" and usability, which has relations with the "human-computer interface" (De Souza and Preece 2004, p. 580; Preece 2000), are the key factors for online communities to succeed.

Scholars tried to differentiate online communities from other communication online, such as computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW), by focusing on its sociability. Some of such distinctions are that many online communities "exist mainly for social interaction," "can involve large groups," develop "by a group of people coming together online for a particular purpose," schedules and timeliness tend not to be a focal issue," "are open to a wide variety of people," and "the skills and knowledge of members may be very broad" (De Souza and Preece 2004, p. 582). These elements work in tandem to create environments where users can effectively communicate, share information, and form relationships.

However, the same mechanisms that facilitate in-group bonding can also lead to the reinforcement of negative attitudes towards outgroups (Coe et al. 2014). The anonymity and echo chamber effects often present in online communities can exacerbate these tendencies, leading to increased polarization and intergroup hostility (Sunstein 2017). This phenomenon has been observed across various platforms and contexts. Anonymity can lower inhibitions and social constraints, allowing users to express more extreme views without fear of personal consequences (Sia et al. 2002). One of the core psychological mechanisms underlying this is deindividuation, a state in which individuals feel a reduced sense of personal identity and accountability. When online users operate behind usernames rather than their real names, their personal identity recedes, and their shared social identity as a member of the online group becomes more salient. This shift from personal to social identity, a key tenet of the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation

Effects (SIDE; Spears 2017), means that individuals are more likely to adhere to the perceived norms of the group rather than their own internal moral compass. If the prevailing norm within the community is hostility towards an outgroup, deindividuated users are more likely to engage in uncivil and aggressive behavior, feeling shielded from personal consequences. Meanwhile, the echo chamber effect occurs when users are primarily exposed to information and opinions that align with their existing beliefs, reinforcing and potentially radicalizing their views (Quattrociocchi et al. 2016).

Moreover, the algorithmic design of many online platforms tends to prioritize engaging content, which often includes more polarizing or extreme viewpoints (Cho et al. 2020; Santos et al. 2021). Outraged or inflammatory posts about an outgroup generate more clicks, comments, and shares, signaling to the platform's algorithm to show them to more users. This can create a feedback loop where extreme content is not only more visible but also normalizes a hostile emotional tone within the community. The combination of these factors – anonymity, echo chambers, and algorithmic amplification – can create an environment where negative outgroup attitudes are not only expressed more freely but also intensified and spread more rapidly (Bail et al. 2018).

Another related mechanism is group polarization, a tendency for groups to make decisions or form opinions that are more extreme than the initial inclinations of their members. This occurs through two primary social-psychological processes. First, according to Persuasive Arguments Theory (Meyers 1989), individuals in a like-minded group are exposed to a greater number of novel arguments that support their existing position, thereby reinforcing and strengthening their beliefs. Second, Social Comparison Theory (Festinger 1957) suggests that individuals look to others in the group to gauge the "correct" opinion and may shift their own view to a more extreme position to be perceived as a good and prototypical group member. Online communities, by filtering out dissenting views, create an environment that fosters both of these processes, initially pushing moderate, negative views toward extreme animosity. Research has shown that exposure to uncivil discourse in online spaces can lead to increased negative perceptions of outgroups and decreased willingness to engage in constructive dialogue with those who hold differing views (Anderson et al. 2014; Frischlich et al. 2021). This dynamic can contribute to a broader societal polarization, as online attitudes and behaviors increasingly spill over into offline interactions, as well as into political processes (Settle 2018).

This study uses the term "online communities" instead of "social media." What are the differences between the two? One of the most popular definitions of social media claims that social media is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 61).

The authors categorized social media platforms by combining the level of social presence/media richness and self-presentation/disclosure. For example, blogs have low social presence/media richness and high self-presentation/disclosure, while virtual game worlds have a high social presence/media richness and low self-presentation/disclosure.

It can be inferred that online communities are not much different from social media. I posit that online communities, especially the ones that are targeted for this analysis, are one of many forms of social media. In online communities, users share their content and there are different levels of social presence/media richness and self-presentation/disclosure in each online community. For example, on DC Inside, one of the largest online communities in Korea, users upload pictures they took together with their casual thoughts and arguments. Another website called Inven, which is specialized in online games and e-sports, offers various spaces where users can share information and their thoughts. They allow users to have high levels of social presence/media richness as well as high levels of self-presentation/disclosure.

In South Korea, there are uncountable communities online. Except for the search engines such as Naver, Google, or Daum and global social media websites such as Youtube or Facebook, the top 10 out of 50 websites with the most visitors are online communities (Kim et al. 2020). DC Inside, one of the earliest and biggest online communities, has more than 150 million visitors a month (Weekly Chosun 2019), followed by other popular communities such as FM Korea, Inven, Ppomppu, and Ruriweb.

1.2 Context of anti-Chinese sentiment in South Korea

To test online intergroup attitudes, it is essential to select a context where the dynamics of identity and threat are active and salient. The relationship between South Korea and China presents a compelling and theoretically rich case for this investigation. Unlike the historically rooted animosity towards Japan or the existential security threat posed by North Korea, anti-Chinese sentiment in South Korea has been described as a relatively recent, politically charged, and digitally amplified phenomenon (Park 2025; Shin et al. 2025). Recent surveys show that South Koreans hate China more than Japan, a country that has colonized Korea for more than thirty years. Also, Koreans hate China more than their long-time enemy since 1950, North Korea, despite the fact that the two Koreas are technically at war (Choe 2021; Lee 2021). The “emotion temperature” towards China and the Chinese people was the lowest among other neighbors – the U.S., Japan, and North Korea. South Koreans felt 26.4 out of 100 toward China while they felt 57.3 toward the U.S. They felt 26.3 toward Chinese people while Americans marked 54.6. Also, 58.1 % of South Koreans think

that China is "close to evil" (Lee 2021). According to Pew Research Center, negative views towards China have reached the highest level in South Korea in the eighteen years since the institution started surveys. In 2002, 31 % of South Koreans made an unfavorable evaluation of China. In 2020, in contrast, 75 % of South Koreans made a negative evaluation of China (Silver et al. 2020). This unique blend of salient, realistic, and symbolic threats makes the South Korea-China relationship a compelling case for testing the tenets of Integrated Threat Theory and examining how different types of threats contribute to outgroup hostility (Jung and Jeong 2016).

The justification for this focus is threefold. First, the historical relationship between the two nations provides a complex psychological backdrop. While marked by deep cultural exchange, it has also been defined by a hierarchical tributary system that informs a modern-day sensitivity to issues of sovereignty and status. This historical memory creates a foundation upon which contemporary threats are interpreted (Chan 2018).

Second, recent decades have seen the rise of tangible realistic threats. China is South Korea's largest trading partner, creating a relationship of economic interdependence that is also a source of friction and vulnerability. This tension became particularly acute following Beijing's unofficial economic retaliation after South Korea's 2017 deployment of the U.S. THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile defense system (Yeo 2023). Furthermore, persistent environmental issues, such as transboundary air pollution, are widely attributed to China and have been empirically shown to exacerbate anti-Chinese sentiment in online discourse (Jiang et al. 2020). These economic and physical concerns constitute classic realistic threats as defined by Integrated Threat Theory.

Third, and most critical for a study of online dynamics, is the recent surge in symbolic threats, which are often fought primarily in digital spaces. Fierce online "culture wars" have erupted over the origins of cultural heritage, including kimchi, hanbok, and even historical figures. These disputes, often amplified by nationalist media outlets in both countries, are perceived by many South Koreans as an attempt to erase or appropriate their cultural identity, representing a potent symbolic threat (Cho 2006; Hahm and Heo 2019; McCurry 2020). It is this confluence of realistic economic and security anxieties with highly emotional, identity-based symbolic conflicts that makes anti-Chinese sentiment particularly powerful. Public opinion polls reflect this trend, with unfavorable views of China among South Koreans increasing dramatically in recent years, reaching levels among the highest in the developed world.

These offline tensions are magnified within South Korean online communities (Jeong 2025; Koo et al. 2024). Therefore, this specific intergroup axis is exceptionally relevant for testing the proposed hypotheses. Because these realistic and symbolic threats are actively debated along ideological lines, this context provides a fertile

ground for testing how political ideology and knowledge filter threat perceptions. Furthermore, studying this dynamic is crucial for international relations, as it sheds light on how public opinion in a key democratic state is shaped in response to China's rise, with implications for regional stability and alliance politics (Lightfoot 2023; Song 2023). From a cross-cultural understanding perspective, this case serves as a microcosm of how digital nationalism can poison public sentiment, creating significant barriers to mutual understanding in an era of globalization.

1.3 Psychological processes: social identity and intergroup threat

Within the online environment and the context described above, two core psychological theories explain how intergroup attitudes are formed and intensified.

1.3.1 Social identity theory (SIT)

Social identity theory (SIT), first proposed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979, provides a lens for a basic understanding of the anti-Chinese sentiment. Tajfel (1972) defined social identity as an "individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (Tajfel 1972, p. 292). Social groups provide their members with a "shared identity" which makes them evaluate themselves in the context of the group. Also, social identity is a critical aspect to make distinctions between ingroups from outgroups (Hogg 2016).

To differentiate ingroups from outgroups, members rely on "subjective belief structures," which refers to "members' beliefs about the nature of the relationship between their group and a specific outgroup" (Hogg 2016, p. 7). To apply this to the anti-Chinese sentiment and slurs observed so far, ingroup members tend to share their own subjective belief structures that contain negative perceptions and prejudice, to differentiate themselves from China or Chinese people. The reason many Korean people call Chinese people "jjang-ggae" may be associated with this strategy to differentiate Chinese people from Koreans. As a lot of online communities in South Korea are formed based on specific interests and tilted toward specific political ideologies, we can assume that users of online communities can experience and solidify their ingroup identity with other users who share similar interests and political ideologies.

Drawing from Social Identity Theory, the strength of an individual's identification with a group is a key predictor of their willingness to engage in in-group-favoring and out-group-derogating behaviors (Ellemers et al. 2002; Tajfel and Turner

1979). Specifically, the theory posits a moderating role for the strength of group identification; individuals who are more strongly identified are more psychologically sensitive to intergroup dynamics and more motivated to protect the group's positive distinctiveness, which is expected to amplify their reactions to intergroup events (Hogg 2016). In the context of online communities, this study operationalizes the theoretical idea of strength of identification (Scheepers and Ellemers 2019) through the concept of users' "emotional attachment" to their community. Emotional attachment does not fully capture all facets of social identity, but it provides a measurable proxy for how strongly individuals identify with their online groups. Accordingly, emotional attachment is expected to moderate the relationship between online engagement and outgroup attitudes, leading to the following hypotheses:

H1. Engaging in the online community is associated with (a) anti-outgroup perceptions and (b) actual consumption of anti-outgroup slurs online.

H2. Emotional attachment to the online community moderates the relation between engaging in the online community and the anti-outgroup sentiment, such that people with higher threat perception have a more negative anti-outgroup sentiment, and people with lower threat perception have a less negative anti-outgroup sentiment.

1.3.2 The integrated threat theory

Together with social identity theory, this study explains the anti-outgroup sentiment in South Korea by utilizing the integrated threat theory of prejudice. According to the theory, there are four types of threats that cause prejudice: realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes(Stephan and Stephan 2000).

Realistic Threats. Realistic threats refer to a danger to "the physical or material well-being of the ingroup or its members (e.g. their health)," which threaten "the very existence of the ingroup" (Stephan and Stephan 2000, p. 25). These threats include "perceived" threats. Perception of threat, regardless of the existence of the actual threat, can cause prejudice. In the current study's context, China's military, political, and economic expansion, and dominance, together with air pollution issues can be categorized into these threats for Koreans. Even if there is no evidence or actual behavior from China, what Koreans perceive as a threat can trigger prejudice against China and the Chinese people.

Symbolic Threats. Symbolic threats have an association with "perceived group differences in morale, values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes" (Stephan and Stephan 2000, p. 25). These pose "threats to the worldview of the ingroup," and "any of the

central values held by the ingroup." As Ysseldyk et al. (2010) note, powerful belief systems, such as religion or political ideology, function as social identities; therefore, challenges to those beliefs, particularly when originating from a perceived outgroup, are perceived not just as disagreements, but as threats to the self and the group. For Koreans, China's attempt to revise history and distort Korean cultural heritages such as kimchi (traditional Korean food) or hanbok (traditional Korean outfit) can function as symbolic threats. Additionally, the political and ideological differences between the two countries can also be contributing factors to symbolic threats.

Intergroup Anxiety. South Koreans can feel threatened by China because "they are concerned about negative outcomes" (Stephan and Stephan 2000, p. 27) from intergroup interactions with China. This idea of intergroup anxiety posits that such levels of anxious expectation would be expressed explicitly and be associated with prejudice directly. South Koreans' heightened anxiety about interacting with China or Chinese people and negative expectations about them can be categorized into this.

Negative Stereotypes. According to the theory, "almost all outgroup stereotypes embody threats to the ingroup" (Stephan and Stephan 2000, p. 27) since ingroup members expect the behaviors of the stereotyped group based on such stereotypes. Once the stereotypes are negative, the ingroup members would make a negative judgment accordingly. Koreans' negative stereotypes about China and its people regardless of their actual experiences or interactions, solidified through online communities, can be explained by the negative stereotypes.

Based on the assumptions of the integrated threat theory, I posit that such phenomena of severe anti-Chinese sentiment and heavy use of slurs have a relation to the threat perception that Koreans possess. Shamoa-Nir and Razpurker-Apfeld (2020) found that subtle religious reminders ("primes") increased Jewish-Israeli participants' perception of threat from Muslims. This heightened sense of threat – not the prime itself – then directly predicted more negative attitudes toward the outgroup. Their findings are highly relevant as they suggest that the hostile content within online communities may function as a continuous "prime," activating the same psychological process of threat perception to fuel intergroup animosity.

H3. The relationship between online community engagement and anti-outgroup sentiment is moderated by threat perception, such that individuals perceiving greater threat exhibit stronger negative sentiment, while those perceiving less threat show weaker negative sentiment.

1.4 Individual-level predictors of outgroup attitudes

Having established the environmental and psychological dynamics, the final part of the framework considers the individual-level factors that determine who is most susceptible to these processes. These individual differences in ideology and cognitive ability act as crucial "filters" that shape how individuals perceive and react to out-groups.

1.4.1 Political ideology

The relationship between political ideology and perceptions of outgroups in online spaces is complex and multifaceted. Rains et al. (2017) found that American conservatives exhibited less uncivil behavior when interacting with perceived in-group members in online discussions. This suggests that ideological alignment may influence the expression and perception of incivility. Gubitz (2022) observed that political ideology influenced sensitivity to incivility, with individuals showing greater sensitivity to uncivil comments targeting their in-group or co-partisans. This finding highlights the potential influence of political ideology on shaping perceptions of anti-outgroup content. However, Muddiman (2021) found no significant differences between Democrats and Republicans in their reactions to incivility, highlighting the complex nature of this relationship.

To add depth to these mixed findings, research in Western political psychology has sought to identify the underlying personality traits and motivations associated with ideology that predict prejudice. A prominent framework is the dual-process motivational model, which links conservatism to two key traits: Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), a preference for social order and cohesion, and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), a preference for group-based hierarchy. Duckitt and Sibley (2009) demonstrate that the perception of the world typically activates RWA as a dangerous place (predicting prejudice against threatening groups), while a view of the world activates SDO as a competitive jungle (predicting prejudice against groups seen as inferior or competing for resources). This provides a deeper psychological mechanism for why conservatism may be linked to negative outgroup attitudes, connecting ideological labels to fundamental motivations regarding group status and threat.

Adding further complexity, recent research highlights how psychological nuance and context can moderate these ideological responses. For instance, Borinca et al. (2022) found that while conservatives may engage in the dehumanization of immigrants, they can nonetheless respond positively to interventions like imagined intergroup contact, especially when emotions are engaged. This suggests that

ideological rigidity does not necessarily block responsiveness to interventions. Conversely, intergroup emotions can be counterintuitive in crisis contexts. Borinca et al. (2023) found that even individuals low in prejudice may respond with negative emotions to an outgroup offering help during a crisis, complicating the simplistic expectation that perceived threat and ideology jointly shape intergroup emotions. These studies underscore the value of examining not only general sentiment but also the perception of specific, emotionally charged content, such as slurs, as these may reveal the nuanced ways in which ideology operates.

Based on the theoretical expectation that conservatism is linked to a greater sensitivity to out-group threats, yet acknowledging the contextual nuances highlighted by the literature, this study proposes the following hypotheses to test these relationships in the South Korean context.

H4a. Conservative political ideology is associated with a higher anti-outgroup sentiment.

H4b. Conservative political ideology is associated with more positive perceptions of anti-outgroup slurs.

1.4.2 Political knowledge

Political knowledge has been shown to play a crucial role in shaping online behavior and attitudes towards outgroups. Carpini and Keeter (1996) argued that political knowledge is fundamental to the functioning of democracy, influencing citizens' ability to form coherent and stable opinions on political matters. This suggests that individuals with higher levels of political knowledge may be better equipped to critically evaluate anti-outgroup content.

Jordan (2024) found that lower levels of political knowledge were associated with a higher likelihood of political extremism. This finding implies that individuals with less political knowledge may be more susceptible to anti-outgroup narratives and less able to critically assess such content. Zaller (1992) proposed that political awareness, closely related to political knowledge, influences how individuals receive and process political information. This theory suggests that those with higher levels of political knowledge may be more discerning in their consumption and interpretation of anti-outgroup content in online communities.

However, research on "motivated reasoning" in the U.S. adds an important layer of nuance to this relationship. While knowledge can foster tolerance, it can also provide highly partisan individuals with the cognitive tools to more effectively defend their pre-existing biases. For instance, Taber and Lodge (2006) found that

politically knowledgeable participants were more likely than less knowledgeable participants to counterargue information that contradicted their beliefs and to accept information that supported them uncritically. This suggests that political knowledge is not a neutral tool, but it can be used as a weapon to protect one's partisan identity. This adds a crucial comparative perspective, suggesting that while knowledge may reduce prejudice based on simple stereotypes, its effect could be different in highly polarized, identity-based conflicts.

Based on the literature suggesting that political knowledge fosters more tolerant and stable attitudes yet acknowledging the nuance that it can also fuel motivated reasoning, this study proposes the following hypotheses to test the primary expected relationship in the South Korean context.

H5a. A lower level of political knowledge is associated with a higher anti-outgroup sentiment.

H5b. A lower level of political knowledge is associated with more positive perceptions of anti-outgroup slurs.

1.4.3 Education

While the relationship between education and anti-outgroup attitudes is not always consistent, previous research has suggested links between education and online behavior. Vargo and Hopp (2017) found that lower levels of education were associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in online incivility. Min and Shen (2023) observed that individuals with higher levels of education tend to be more discerning and sensitive about incivility. These findings highlight the complex relationship between education, political knowledge, and online behavior, warranting further investigation in the context of outgroup perceptions.

Also, individuals with higher levels of education are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Duplaga 2020; van Prooijen 2017). These findings imply that people with higher levels of education are more discerning and sensitive about incivility (Min and Shen 2023) and they are more capable of critical thinking than less educated (McPeck 2016).

A foundational study on intergroup attitudes in Western contexts by Quillian (1995) offers a detailed examination of the role of education. In his analysis of prejudice across 12 European countries, education was treated as a key individual-level independent variable, measured in years of schooling. The study's results confirmed a statistically significant negative relationship. Respondents with higher levels of education expressed less racial and anti-immigrant prejudice. The study

also found that the prejudice-reducing effect of education was more substantial in high-threat contexts (i.e., countries with a higher percentage of non-EEC immigrants). This suggests that while education is generally associated with greater tolerance, its role as a buffer against prejudice may become even more important when intergroup tensions are high.

Drawing on established literature that suggests education can act as a buffer against prejudice, particularly in high-threat situations, this study proposes the following hypotheses to test this relationship in the South Korean online context.

H6a. A lower level of education is associated with a higher level of anti-outgroup sentiment.

H6b. A lower level of education is associated with more positive perceptions of anti-outgroup slurs.

2 Methods

2.1 Design

This study employed a cross-sectional online survey design to examine the 3relationships between online community engagement, individual-level characteristics, and anti-outgroup attitudes.

2.2 Participants

A total of 300 participants were recruited in April 2023 through the Korea Society Opinion Institute (KSOI), an organization with two decades of experience conducting national-level social surveys that possesses its own recruitment platform in South Korea. An a priori power analysis was performed using G*Power 3.1 to estimate the required sample size. To detect a small-to-medium effect size (f^2 = 0.05) with 80 % power at an alpha level of 0.05 for a multiple regression with five predictors (age, sex, income, education, and political knowledge), a sample of 214 participants was required. Therefore, our achieved sample of 300 was considered adequate for the primary analyses of interest. Participants were sourced from KSOI's existing nationwide online panel. To ensure data quality, a professional survey engineer from KSOI manually reviewed the collected data to ensure its integrity. This process included filtering out suspicious or illogical response patterns, excluding data from

participants who completed the survey in an unusually short amount of time, and removing incomplete responses from those who dropped out midway. Eligibility criteria stipulated that participants must be South Korean nationals, 18 years of age or older, and current users of online communities. For their participation, respondents received web points equivalent to approximately 2,000 KRW (about $1.50 USD). These points can be accumulated within the KSOI panel system and later redeemed for various gift cards. The respondents' average age was 46 years old (SD = 12.10) and more men (61 %, n = 183) participated than women (38.7 %, n = 116). 81 % of them reported that they graduated from college (n = 243). 36.7 % of the respondents (n = 110) live in Seoul, the capital city, following Gyeonggi Province (21 %, n = 63). 40.3 % of them (n = 121) reported they work in clerical occupations.

Because this study specifically targeted individuals who actively use online communities, the sample is not representative of the entire South Korean population. Instead, it reflects the attitudes of a digitally engaged subset of citizens. While recruitment through the survey firm's nationwide panel enhances demographic diversity and provides reasonable coverage of age, gender, and region, the findings should be generalized primarily to populations with regular online community participation rather than to all South Koreans.

2.3 Materials and measures

The survey instrument, developed in English for an IRB review process, was professionally translated into Korean by the author and subsequently reviewed by a Ph.D. student bilingual in both languages to ensure linguistic and cultural accuracy for the target population. The internal consistency of the key multi-item scales was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, demonstrating high reliability for the online community engagement scale (α = 0.85), the emotional attachment scale (α = 0.90), and the anti-outgroup sentiment trait adjective scale (α = 0.86 for China).

2.4 Procedure

The survey was administered online by KSOI using their recruitment platform. A survey invitation URL was distributed to panelists who met the inclusion criteria. Before beginning the survey, participants were presented with an informed consent form written in the Korean language. To prevent priming effects, the consent form did not disclose the specific focus on anti-Chinese sentiment. A mandatory 30-s waiting period was implemented to ensure participants had sufficient time to read the consent information before proceeding. After completing the questionnaire,

which took approximately 20 min, participants were shown a debriefing statement that fully explained the study's purpose.

2.5 Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with all relevant ethical guidelines. The research protocol (IRB Submission ID: STUDY00002673) was reviewed and approved by the University of Arizona's Institutional Review Board on March 27, 2023. The study was determined to be exempt research involving no more than minimal risk to participants. All participants provided informed consent electronically prior to participating in the study. To prevent potential psychological discomfort, participants were not primed about the study's focus on anti-Chinese sentiment and were provided with a full debriefing upon completion. All data were collected anonymously, with no personal identifying information recorded, to ensure participant privacy and confidentiality. The anonymized data is stored on a password-protected external drive accessible only to the primary investigator.

2.6 Independent variable

2.6.1 Engagement in the online communities

At the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked whether they use online communities or not. The survey continued only with the respondents who use online communities. They were requested to indicate which online communities they are engaging with. The frequency of using online communities was measured by asking how much they use online communities: *more than once a day; once every 2 days; once every 3–4 days; once a week;* and *once every 10 days or less.* The respondents' participation was measured by asking how often they *read post*s, *reply to pos*ts, *press 'like', share posts to others*, *post my own*, and *meet other users offline* on a 7-point Likert scale (*never* to *always*). The alpha was 0.85. The two items converged to create an engagement scale (M = 20.87, SD = 7.25).

2.6.2 Political ideology

Political ideology was measured by asking *Which of the following do you think is your political orientation?* on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*Liberal*) to 7 (*Conservative*). Most people indicated their political position toward the center (M = 4.04, SD = 1.20).

2.6.3 Political knowledge

Political knowledge was measured using four items: *How long is the term of office of the National Assembly of Korea? How long is the term of office of the Korean president? Please select which government branches are of 'separation of powers'* and *How many seats are currently in the National Assembly of Korea?* The total number of right answers was coded to create the political knowledge scale (M = 3.07, SD = 0.90).

2.6.4 Education

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of education: *elementary school graduate; middle school graduate; high school graduate; college graduate;* and *graduate school or above.* 70 % and 11 % of the respondents reported they are respectively college graduates (n = 210) and graduate school or above (n = 33), consisting 81 % of the total respondents. 18.7 % (n = 56) graduated from high school.

2.7 Dependent variables

2.7.1 Anti-outgroup sentiment

The feeling thermometer is a widely used tool to capture "respondents' feelings about a given person, group, or issue" (Lavrakas 2008, p. 276). In this study, the feeling thermometer of 0 (*very cold*) to 100 (*very warm*) was used to measure how the respondents think about China and Chinese people. Also, the respondents were asked to evaluate their own country – South Korea – and three countries that are politically close to them – North Korea, the United States, and Japan – and their people to compare the results. The respondents reported the highest feeling thermometer towards their ingroup, South Korea, and its people (M = 66.97, SD = 22.37). The United States was the second favorite (M = 59.81, SD = 18.45), followed by Japan (M = 44.50, SD = 23.33) and North Korea (M = 40.30, SD = 24.90). The feeling thermometer of China was the coldest (M = 32.53, SD = 24.40), less than half of South Korea's thermometer, indicating that China is the farthest outgroup to South Koreans.

In addition, they were asked to evaluate those countries and the people by using eight trait adjectives: *violent* (reverse coded); *dishonest* (reverse coded); *unintelligent* (reverse coded); *friendly*; *arrogant* (reverse coded); *kind*; and inferior (reverse coded), using a 7-point Likert scale, 1 (*never*) to 7 (*extremely*) (Velasco González et al. 2008). South Korea scored the highest evaluation (α = 0.86, M = 4.47, SD = 0.99), followed by the US (α = 0.78, M = 4.00, SD = 0.79), Japan (α = 0.86, M = 3.97, SD = 1.04), North

Korea (α = 0.86, M = 3.40, SD = 0.1.05). China obtained the lowest score (α = 0.86, M = 2.96, SD = 0.97).

Each country's feeling thermometer score was converted by multiplying 0.07, then converged with the evaluation score to create a general sentiment scale. South Korea scored 4.57 (SD = 1.07), followed by the United States (M = 4.10, SD = 0.89), Japan (M = 3.54, SD = 1.18), and North Korea (M = 3.10, SD = 1.22). China scored the lowest, 2.62 (SD = 1.18).

2.7.2 Consumption of slurs against the outgroup

The existing slurs about China, "jjang-ggae (짱깨)"; "The only good Chinese is a dead Chinese (착짱죽짱/착한 짱깨는 죽은 짱깨)"; and "Nanjing Grand Festival (난징대축제)" were presented to the respondents. The respondents were asked whether they had seen these slurs in online communities and whether they had any experience in using them in person. 71.3 % of the respondents reported that they have seen the slurs (n = 214) and 10 % of the respondents reported that they have used such slurs (n = 30).

2.7.3 Perceptions of slurs against the outgroup

The respondents selected whatever they felt when they saw the slurs: *nothing; pleasure; unpleasant; funny;* and *sorry*. The respondents' positive perceptions of the anti-Chinese slurs (*pleasure* and *funny*) and negative perceptions of the slurs (*unpleasant* and *sorry*) were coded separately for analysis. 64.3 % perceived the slurs as negative (n = 193) and 13.7 % perceived the slurs as positive (n = 41).

2.8 Moderator

2.8.1 Threat perception

The respondents were asked to pick one country that poses the greatest threat to South Korea among four countries, China, North Korea, Japan, and the United States. A large number of people selected North Korea (41.3 %, n = 124), and China (35.3 %, n = 106). 19.7 % of people selected Japan (n = 59) and only 3 % perceived the United States as the greatest threat (n = 9).

For those who selected China as the greatest threat, two additional questions were given. One question asked which area is mostly being threatened by China: *security*; *economy*; *environment*; *democracy*; *culture*; and *history*. Another question asked about the degree of the threat to each area, using a 7-point Likert scale (*none* to

extremely). 42.5 % of people who perceive China as the greatest threat selected the economy as the most threatened area (n = 45). Security (24.5 %, n = 26) and environment (17 %, n = 18) followed, indicating that the realistic threat is the most salient threat to Koreans.

2.8.2 Emotional attachment to the online communities

First, the respondents reported how much they feel a sense of belonging on a 7-point Likert scale, 1 (*none*) to 7 (*extremely*). Their mean sense of belonging was 4.13 (SD = 1.47).

Their feeling thermometer toward users of the online communities was measured from 0 (*very cold*) to 100 (*very warm*). Their mean feeling thermometer was 56.38 (SD = 21.80).

Their evaluations of other users of the communities were measured on a 7-point Likert scale by asking how much the users are; *trustworthy; respectable; useful; friendly*; and *(have)* a *lot to learn from*. The five items converged to create an emotional attachment scale (α = 0.90, M = 4.37, SD = 0.97).

The feeling thermometer score was converted by multiplying 0.07, then converged with the sense of belonging score and evaluation score to create a general emotional attachment scale (M = 4.15, SD = 1.12).

3 Results

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software. To test the proposed hypotheses, a series of correlation and Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) multiple regression analyses were conducted. Before hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics were run for all key variables. Reliability analyses confirmed the internal consistency of the multi-item scales for online community engagement (α = 0.85) and emotional attachment (α = 0.90).

3.1 Online engagement and threat

Hypothesis 1 (H1) predicted that engagement in online communities would be associated with higher anti-outgroup sentiment. An OLS regression testing the effect of engagement on anti-Chinese sentiment found the relationship to be non-significant (B = 0.07, p = 0.058). Hypothesis 2 (H2) predicted that this relationship would be moderated by emotional attachment. A correlation between emotional attachment and positive slur perception was not significant (r = 0.006, p = 0.912), and

the interaction term for moderation was not statistically significant in the broader analysis. Hypothesis 3 (H3) predicted a moderating role for threat perception, but this interaction was also not statistically significant. Therefore, H1, H2, and H3 were not supported.

3.2 Political ideology

Hypothesis 4a (H4a) predicted that a conservative political ideology would be associated with higher anti-outgroup sentiment. An OLS regression was conducted to test this relationship. The result was not statistically significant, $F(1, 298) = 0.38$, $p = 0.537$, with political ideology not emerging as a significant predictor of anti-outgroup sentiment toward China ($B = -0.04$, $p = 0.537$). H4a was not supported.

Hypothesis 4b (H4b) predicted that a conservative political ideology would be associated with more positive perceptions of anti-outgroup slurs. A Pearson correlation was conducted between political ideology and positive slur perception. The analysis revealed a significant, albeit modest, positive correlation, $r(298) = 0.14$, $p = 0.015$. This indicates that as political ideology tended toward more conservatism, the likelihood of perceiving anti-Chinese slurs positively increased. Therefore, H4b was supported.

3.3 Political knowledge and education

The final set of hypotheses explored the roles of political knowledge and education. These were tested using two multiple regression models that included political knowledge, education, and key demographic variables (age, sex, income) as predictors. Table 1 presents the results for both models.

Table 1: Multiple regression models predicting anti-Chinese sentiment and positive slur perception.

	Model 1: anti-Chinese sentiment				Model 2: positive slur perception			
Predictor	***B***	**SE**	***β***	**Sig. (*p*-Value)**	***B***	**SE**	***β***	**Sig. (*p*-Value)**
(Constant)	2.31	0.57		<0.001	0.33	0.16		0.043
Political knowledge	−0.22	0.08	−0.17	0.005	−0.06	0.02	−0.16	0.008
Age	0.01	0.01	0.12	0.045	−0.003	0.002	−0.10	0.083
Sex	−0.02	0.14	−0.01	0.879	0.05	0.04	0.07	0.225
Education	0.11	0.13	0.05	0.431	−0.02	0.04	−0.03	0.683
Income	0.02	0.05	0.03	0.653	0.03	0.01	0.12	0.064
$N = 300$. $R^2 = 0.04$. $F = 2.42$, $p = 0.036$.					$N = 300$. $R^2 = 0.05$. $F = 2.96$, $p = 0.013$.			

3.3.1 Model 1: predicting anti-Chinese sentiment

Hypothesis 5a (H5a) predicted that a lower level of political knowledge would be associated with higher anti-outgroup sentiment. As shown in Table 1, the results indicate that political knowledge was a significant negative predictor of anti-outgroup sentiment (β = −0.17, p = 0.005). This means that as political knowledge increased, anti-outgroup sentiment toward China decreased. Therefore, H5a was supported. Hypothesis 6a (H6a) predicted that a lower level of education would be associated with higher anti-outgroup sentiment. As shown in Table 1, education was not a statistically significant predictor of anti-outgroup sentiment when controlling for other variables (β = 0.05, p = 0.431). Therefore, H6a was not supported.

3.3.2 Model 2: predicting positive slur perception

Hypothesis 5b (H5b) predicted that a lower level of political knowledge would be associated with more positive perceptions of anti-outgroup slurs. The results in Table 1 show that political knowledge was a significant negative predictor of positive slur perception (β = −0.16, p = 0.008). As political knowledge increased, the likelihood of perceiving slurs positively decreased. H5b was supported. Hypothesis 6b (H6b) predicted that a lower level of education would be associated with more positive perceptions of anti-outgroup slurs. As shown in Table 1, education was not a significant predictor of positive slur perception (β = −0.03, p = 0.683).

4 Discussions

This study investigated the roles of political ideology and political knowledge in shaping anti-outgroup attitudes within South Korean online communities. The findings reveal a nuanced landscape in which individual-level political cognitions are more predictive of hostility than general online engagement or demographic factors, such as education. One of the most notable findings was the negative correlation between political knowledge and both anti-outgroup sentiment and positive perceptions of anti-outgroup slurs. This supports previous research indicating that higher levels of political knowledge are associated with more nuanced views of complex societal issues (Carpini and Keeter 1996; Jordan 2024). The result suggests that enhancing political knowledge could be a potential avenue for mitigating negative intergroup attitudes and promoting more civil online discourse. In other words, this supports a foundational argument in democratic theory that a well-informed citizenry is more resistant to crude prejudice and extremist narratives. By

demonstrating this relationship in a non-Western, highly digital context, this study provides important validation for the generalizability of that principle.

Conversely, political ideology showed a more complex pattern. While conservatism did not predict general anti-outgroup sentiment, the study revealed a significant correlation between conservative political ideology and the positive perception of anti-outgroup slurs. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that political orientation can influence how individuals engage with uncivil content online (Gubitz 2022; Rains et al. 2017). The distinction between a general negative feeling (sentiment) and the endorsement of specific hostile speech (slur perception) is a critical theoretical point. It suggests that, in this context, conservatism may not be associated with a baseline dislike, but rather with an increased willingness to endorse transgressive acts of in-group boundary enforcement, which warrants further investigation.

The practical implications of these findings suggest that interventions aimed at curbing online hostility may be more effective if they focus on media literacy and enhancing political knowledge rather than simply discouraging online community use or blaming them (Bentivegna and Rega 2024; Middaugh 2019). The results indicate that fostering a deeper, more contextualized understanding of complex geopolitical issues could be a potential avenue for mitigating negative intergroup attitudes and promoting a more civil online discourse.

This study also produced several critical null results. The lack of a significant relationship between general online engagement, emotional attachment, or a broad measure of threat perception and anti-outgroup sentiment is theoretically informative. This does not necessarily mean these theories are ill-suited to the South Korean context. Instead, it strongly suggests that the measures used were inadequate to capture these complex processes. "Engagement" is not a monolithic activity; the null finding prompts a more critical examination of how users engage, distinguishing between passive consumption and the active production of hostile content online (Cicchirillo et al. 2015; Law et al. 2012). Similarly, the failure of a single-item threat measure to predict attitudes highlights the need for more nuanced scales that can differentiate between realistic and symbolic threats, as detailed in the limitations below.

5 Limitations

The findings of this study must be considered in light of several limitations. First, the study is limited by its statistical power. The sample size (N = 300) was not large enough to reliably detect small interaction effects, which is a likely reason the moderation hypotheses were not supported. Furthermore, the low prevalence of self-

reported slur usage (n = 30) rendered any inferential analysis of that specific behavior untestable. Despite the vast majority of this paper's hypotheses being about the use of the anti-Chinese slur, only 10 % of the respondents answered that they actually use the slur. This low number is likely a result of both the actual rarity of the behavior and the strong influence of social desirability bias in self-report surveys, as respondents may feel shame or guilt about admitting to using such language.

Second, several key constructs were measured in overly simplistic ways, which impacts the interpretation of the null findings. The measure for threat perception was a single, forced-choice item that lacks the construct validity to represent the distinct types of realistic and symbolic threats as theorized by ITT. This measurement weakness is a probable explanation for the non-significant findings related to threat perception. Similarly, the measures for slur perception and emotional attachment would have benefited from more nuanced, multi-item scales. The null results for online engagement and emotional attachment, therefore, do not necessarily mean these factors are unimportant, but rather that the broad measures used in this exploratory study may not have captured their effects. Also, political knowledge is based on four factual items; while standard in some literatures, this narrow operationalization does not fully capture conceptual engagement with politics or ideological complexity.

6 Future research

The limitations of this study provide a clear roadmap for future research. A direct replication with a larger, pre-registered sample, powered to detect more minor interaction effects, is a necessary next step. Future studies should also employ robust, validated multi-item scales for key constructs, such as threat perception, to allow for a more rigorous test of Integrated Threat Theory.

To address the limitations of self-report, future work should employ more sophisticated methodological approaches. For instance, techniques like indirect questioning or list experiments could be used to provide more accurate estimates of the prevalence of slur usage by mitigating social desirability bias. Furthermore, future research should move beyond correlational survey designs and use experimental priming, where participants are exposed to different types of threatening or uncivil online content to establish a causal link between exposure and attitudes.

To create a richer picture, researchers should also utilize behavioral measures, such as the computational analysis of publicly available online discussion data, to study how hostile narratives are produced and spread organically. Ultimately, this work would benefit from cross-cultural comparisons with other non-Western countries and a deeper engagement with the existing literature on online

radicalization and affective polarization, particularly in the specific context of South Korea's unique media affordances.

7 Conclusions

Despite its limitations, this study is valuable as a pioneering investigation into the nature of incivility within South Korean online communities. The findings contribute to a more global and comparative understanding of online intergroup dynamics by testing established social-psychological theories in an under-researched, non-Western context. This research underscores the crucial role of political knowledge in fostering tolerance and highlights a nuanced function for political ideology in the endorsement of hostile speech. It opens up several important avenues for future inquiry that can build upon this study's exploratory findings to create a richer picture of intergroup relations in the digital age.

From a historical and theoretical perspective, these findings can be situated within South Korea's long and evolving relationship with China. Historically, cultural exchange, hierarchical tributary ties, and memories of domination have coexisted with modern interdependence and competition between Korea and China (Sleziak 2014; Zhang et al. 2005). This study shows how such historical memories resurface in digital spaces, where symbolic disputes – over history, culture, and identity – gain renewed intensity (Hahm and Heo 2019; Hundt and He 2015). Theoretically, the findings underscore the need to link micro-level cognitive factors, such as political knowledge, with broader trajectories of intergroup relations: how long-standing national narratives and geopolitical tensions are reinterpreted through contemporary online discourse. By tracing this connection, the study highlights that online hostility is not merely a product of digital affordances but also a continuation of historically embedded intergroup dynamics that are rearticulated in the digital age.

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