Socially Mediated Visibility:
Friendship and Dissent in Authoritarian Azerbaijan

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Socially mediated visibility refers to *technical features* of social media platforms and the *strategic actions* of individuals or groups to manage the content and associations visible on social media channels, as well as inferences and consequences resulting from that visibility. As a root affordance, the visibility of content and associations shared in mediated settings can vary, with users typically retaining only partial control over visibility. Understanding how social and technical factors affect visibility plays a critical role in managing one's online self-presentation. This qualitative study of young dissident Azerbaijanis (*N* = 29) considers the management strategies as well as the risks and benefits associated with increased visibility when sharing marginalized political views through social media. Socially mediated visibility helps dissidents advocate and connect with like-minded others, but also increases the likelihood that their dissent is visible to those who may disagree with it and can punish them for it. This study considers the effect of the visibility of dissent on peer relationships.

Keywords: visibility, Azerbaijan, social media, dissident, affordances, authoritarianism

Social media afford users opportunities to broadcast information to small and large audiences, find information, and connect and interact with others who have shared interests. Social media activity is simultaneously mass and interpersonal—or "masspersonal communication" (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2017)—

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creating both opportunities and challenges for individuals. These are outcomes tied to the root affordance of visibility. Social media ease visibility and reduce the importance of spatial and temporal copresence. This study makes two contributions to our understanding of socially mediated visibility. First, it extends literature on marginalized populations' management of visibility, and, second, it evaluates the relational outcomes associated with the socially mediated visibility of risky political expression.

This qualitative study of young dissident Azerbaijanis (*N* = 29) considers the management strategies as well as the risks and benefits associated with increased visibility when sharing marginalized political views through social media. For those living in an authoritarian regime, the visibility afforded by social media may help dissidents advocate and connect with like-minded others, but it also makes it more likely that their dissent is visible to those who may disagree with it and can punish them. There are many negative outcomes associated with dissent, including imprisonment and physical attacks, and socially mediated visibility may lead to a greater likelihood of such outcomes (Pearce, 2015; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012). This study focuses on a less obvious outcome: the effect of the visibility of dissent on peer relationships.

Background on Authoritarian Azerbaijan

The context of this study is Azerbaijan, one of the most authoritarian post-Soviet states (Frichova Grono, 2011). Authoritarianism is both an ideological construct and a set of informal and formal institutions that control access to and exercise of authority, as authority exclusively rests with a leader or a small group (Linz, 2000). In such systems, citizens are excluded from policy making, are denied civil liberties, and are subject to strong social control (Vaillant, 2012).

In an authoritarian regime like Azerbaijan, repercussions associated with even minor criticism of the ruling regime are severe (Bedford, Vinatier, Alieva, & Gojayev, 2016; Laporte, 2015; Pearce, 2015; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012); thus, many citizens self-censor (Abbasov, 2010; Gahramanova, 2009). For those who do speak out, there are formal mechanisms to discourage and punish dissent. Freedom of assembly is extremely limited, there is no free press, and political dissidents are publicly humiliated and imprisoned (Pearce, 2014, 2015; Pearce & Guliyev, 2015). Most oppositional activities now take place online, although in a limited capacity with great risk (Pearce, 2014; Pearce & Guliyev, 2015). As with many other authoritarian states, there was early enthusiasm for how the Internet could open cracks in the regime (Carothers, 2002). Some argue that technology may allow for easier collective action in authoritarian states (Zhang & Lin, 2014), provide a space for public deliberation and expression of discontent (Leijendekker & Mutsvairo, 2014), and increase access to information (Leijendekker & Mutsvairo, 2014). Yet time has shown that the Internet has not done much to promote democracy in Azerbaijan, despite these possibilities (Pearce, 2015; Pearce & Guliyev, 2015). In fact, oppositional activities online carry risk—and sometimes even greater risk than off-line activities—because the visibility of these spaces increases the likelihood that authorities will see dissent and because the regime fears the viral spread of dissenting content and thus punishes it more severely (Pearce, 2015; Pearce & Hajizada, 2014; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012).

Authoritarian Friendships

In a risky authoritarian environment, interpersonal relationships are different from those in democratic environments. Interpersonal trust is typically low (Pearce, Barta, & Fesenmaier, 2015; Uslaner, 2003), and forming relationships with others differs in key ways. Kharkhordin (2016) describes friendship in an authoritarian regime as "a dearly earned achievement, rather than an innocuous ascription: in a society where relatives informed on each other, an ultimate and real friend was a person who withstood the threat of terror and did not betray" (p. 220). In authoritarian environments, relationships tend to be instrumental and strategic, often tied to potential access to resources (Aliyev, 2015; Pearce et al., 2015). Friendship choices are not made frivolously, and a great deal of effort is put into maintaining them (Kharkhordin, 2016; Pearce et al., 2015). This presents a dilemma: One needs relationships to access resources, yet maintaining these relationships increases vulnerability and requires effort. Thus, in the ongoing consideration of the relative value of a friend, benefits are continuously assessed. This requires both information and monitoring, which are inevitably made easier with social media.

Nonetheless, one may decide that a friendship no longer has value or is problematic. Friendship dissolution is easier than ending other relationships (family, romantic) (Johnson et al., 2004); however, friendship dissolution is serious and can cause "considerable distress" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 503). In an authoritarian regime, dissent is so risky that others may seek to end the association (Pearce & Vitak, 2016; Yaghi, 2015). This can also be considered selective avoidance, where individuals shield themselves from conflicting viewpoints by screening out unwanted information and dissolving relationships with people who transmit unwanted information (Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2017).

Although many studies have evaluated socially mediated political visibility and its associated outcomes, even in risky environments, there is a paucity of research on the interpersonal effects in such environments (Mor, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Maoz [2015] and Zhu, Skoric, & Shen [2017] being notable exceptions). As Mor et al. (2015) note about social media and political expression in a highly divided society, there is "a distinct set of dilemmas, challenges, and coping strategies" (p. 7). In the current study, we expand on their work by studying the challenges faced and strategies employed by young dissidents.

Conceptualizing Socially Mediated Visibility

Using an affordances framework (Davis & Chouinard, 2017; Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017), we consider socially mediated visibility and its relational outcomes in a politically marginalized population. In line with Flyverbom, Leonardi, Stohl, and Stohl (2016), we note that visibility is a *root affordance*—superseding other affordances—that helps branch to other affordances.

Conceptually, visibility is the situated and reciprocal state of that which can be seen, or that which is perceived by the sense of sight (Thompson, 2000, 2005). Socially mediated visibility refers to both the role technology plays as well as individuals' or groups' strategic management of content and associations that can be viewed through social media channels, as well as the resulting inferences and

consequences. As a root affordance, the visibility of content and associations shared in mediated settings can vary, with users typically retaining only partial control. Understanding how social and technical factors interact in affecting visibility plays a critical role in managing one's online self-presentation.

As with more general discussions of visibility (Brighenti, 2007, 2010), socially mediated visibility includes three primary dimensions. The first dimension is *relational*—visibility requires both a seer and an object (Brighenti, 2010). While interactivity between two or more actors is a necessary component of general visibility (Amiraux, 2006), with socially mediated visibility, perceived interactivity is paramount (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Moreover, the notion of audience has changed with the reduced importance of spatial and temporal properties of visibility (Thompson, 2005).

The second dimension is *strategic*, because visibility can be manipulated for individuals' goals (Brighenti, 2010), although total control is impossible (Edenborg, 2017). With socially mediated visibility, technical tools allow for different and greater management, and we thus consider socially mediated visibility management strategies.

The third dimension is *outcome-driven*, as visibility affords various consequences (Brighenti, 2007, 2010; Thompson, 2005). Given the wider audience, persistence, and greater opportunities to capture and share, outcomes of socially mediated visibility may be even more impactful. This study answers calls for more scholarly attention to outcomes and consequences of visibility (Brighenti, 2007; Thompson, 2005). This is especially important because focusing on outcomes of visibility—and in particular the costs of visibility (Nardi & Engeström, 1999)—allows better contextualization and, consequently, better theorizing about visibility.

A conceptualization of visibility—mediated, socially mediated, or otherwise—must also consider the complex relationship between visibility and power. Scholarly understanding of this relationship is frequently articulated through a Foucauldian lens, with particular focus on the panopticon to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977, pp. 201–202). Visibility is linked to power, because it is not only used by those with power to control others, but visibility is power's *condition of possibility*—practices are meaningless, and thus have no power, if they are not visible (Gordon, 2002). It is this link between visibility and power that deems it so important to look at marginalized populations and how visibility leads to a wide variety of outcomes. "Visibility is not necessarily benign but may lead to insecurity and vulnerability" (Edenborg, 2017, p. 6). Within communication, Gray's work (2009) on the complex negotiations related to visibility of LGBT+ youth both off-line and online is an exemplar. In this article, we follow Gray's (2009) framing of visibility and power—specifically, that visibility should be contextualized relative to the power structures in which one is operating.

Increased visibility afforded by social media is often linked to beneficial outcomes, though increased visibility is a double-edged sword. While individuals and groups may benefit from increased visibility in efforts to share information and engage in advocacy, that same visibility may also open them up to increased vulnerabilities, risk, and harassment. This presents unique challenges to marginalized

individuals and populations (Amiraux, 2006; Edenborg, 2017), including on social media (Fritz & Gonzales, this Special Section; Gonzales, Kwon, Lynch, & Fritz, 2016; Pearce, 2015).

Social Media and Visibility

In this section, we articulate branch affordances of visibility and evaluate the associated risks and benefits to the individual, focusing on the disclosure and relational and audience outcomes.

Social Media Afford Visibility Through Disclosure and Expression

One of the most commonly studied branches of the visibility affordance is disclosure, and, relatedly, expression. Disclosure in socially mediated spaces differs from face-to-face disclosures in several ways. First, social media spaces encourage disclosure in both social and technical ways, in part because these platforms derive value on the content contributions of users (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Ellison & boyd, 2013). Also, digital disclosures are persistent (Treem & Leonardi, 2013) and more easily locatable (Evans et al., 2017).

Social Media Afford Political Visibility

The study of social media and visibility contains a wealth of research on political expression and visibility of political preferences via social media (Halpern & Gibbs, 2012). We note the limited transferability of findings on political visibility in democracies to the Azerbaijani case, though broader findings on socially mediated political visibility are possibly also present in Azerbaijan. For example, one particular form of political expression is sharing news on social media, which individuals do for self-serving, altruistic, or social reasons (Kümpel, Karnowski, & Keyling, 2015). Conversely, social media provide opportunities for acquiring and discussing political information. Also, social media are spaces for political discussion and deliberation, even when disagreements occur (Huckfeldt & Mendez, 2008).

Visibility Is Managed Strategically

With the increased visibility afforded by social media, individuals engage in visibility management (Vitak & Kim, 2014). A popularly studied subset of socially mediated visibility management is impression management (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Pearce & Vitak, 2016). Engaging in impression management is especially important when it comes to polarizing or controversial topics (Hayes, Smock, & Carr, 2015; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). In fact, several studies have found that self-censorship is the preferred online impression management response with regard to political content (Thorson, 2014).

Socially Mediated Visibility Has Relational Consequences

Engagement in impression management, and especially self-censorship, is unsurprising, because evidence suggests that political content posted online has costs, particularly with regard to interpersonal relationships. Friends may hide or unfriend those who share unwanted or undesirable political information (Hayes et al., 2015; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Schwarz & Shani, 2016; Zhu et al., 2017) or end the

friendships (Schwarz & Shani, 2016). In fact, posting polarizing content is the first (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Sibona & Walczak, 2014) or second most commonly cited reason for unfriending (Bevan, Pfyl, & Barclay, 2012; Sibona & Walczak, 2011).

Friendship dissolution on social media is different than severing a friendship off-line (Sibona & Walczak, 2011, 2014; Vitak & Ellison, forthcoming). In particular, friendship dissolution has a lower cost online than it does off-line, because it may involve just one click. However, the conscious and public decision to unfriend someone on social media is different from the slow and more private process of ending a friendship off-line (Sibona & Walczak, 2011). When a defriending occurs, it is visible to others because of the public articulation of connections (e.g., friend lists). In recent years, sites such as Facebook have provided technical methods (e.g., an "unfollow" feature) to create distance with another user without completely severing the tie.

Socially Mediated Visibility Has Audience Outcomes

The broader and sometimes unanticipated audience is another popular branch of visibility. Digital content is typically visible to a wide audience (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Ellison & boyd, 2013; Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Vitak & Ellison, forthcoming). While individuals imagine their audience before posting content (Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Mor et al., 2015), they are notoriously bad at estimating the size and composition of that audience (Bernstein, Bakshy, Burke, & Karrer, 2013). Moreover, social media affect users' abilities to tailor disclosures to particular groups because audiences are collapsed (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Moreover, there is an increased chance for unintended audiences to see content (Pearce & Vitak, 2016). Especially because the digital nature of social media content means that it can be saved, shared, and edited, and thus shared with unintended others, often without consent (Mor et al., 2015; Pearce, 2015; Pearce & Vitak, 2016).

Much scholarship on audience focuses on the negative outcomes of increased visibility to a broader and/or unanticipated audience, but there are also benefits. For example, as in the case of wanting something to "go viral," spreading information that may not be available from mainstream sources (LeFebvre & Armstrong, 2016) may enhance one's social status (Lee & Ma, 2012).

So Why Accept Political Visibility Despite the Risks?

One reason that individuals may risk the negative consequences associated with political visibility is because the broadcast branch of socially mediated visibility is powerful. Individuals may view relational and audience risks as worthwhile when they are able to broadly disseminate content, specifically when spreading a political message (Mor et al., 2015), engaging in advocacy (Blackwell et al., 2016), or fundraising (Fritz & Gonzales, this Special Section; Gonzales et al., 2016).

Finding like-minded others who can potentially provide social support is another branch of socially mediated visibility that may explain why people take on such risk. These relationships are especially

powerful because "similarity in experiences with a stressor, as well as with the attributes of others, may encourage empathy and a sense of belonging" (Rains & Wright, 2015, pp. 185–186). A corpus of literature suggests that finding such like-minded others for social support purposes is especially important for marginalized populations (Blackwell et al., 2016; Fritz & Gonzales, this Special Section). Findings in political communication also suggest individuals are more likely to engage, and to engage more frequently, in political discussion with like-minded others (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). For individuals holding a minority political opinion in an authoritarian state, the sense of belonging fostered by finding other people with similar political views may be particularly impactful and validating. In our findings, we refer to expressions of shared political views and validation of political views from peers as political support to underscore the important role participants ascribed to such supportive messages. There is also work within the social movement literature, particularly in authoritarian regimes, that finds like-minded political others to be a key driver of sustaining involvement in dissident youth groups (Lyytikäinen, 2016; Yaghi, 2015).

Current Study: How Azerbaijani Dissidents Manage Socially Mediated Visibility

Young Azerbaijani dissidents must employ strategies to balance the risks that could result from their visibility with the potential benefits of advocacy and finding peers who share their beliefs. Therefore, our research questions are designed to unpack how these young people consider risks and benefits and identify the strategies they employ when social media afford political visibility.

RQ1:   *What visibility management strategies do young Azerbaijani dissidents engage in on social media?*

RQ2:   *What risks and benefits do young Azerbaijani dissidents perceive related to social media visibility with regard to their peers?*

Method

We conducted 29 semistructured, Azerbaijani-language, in-person interviews (19 men, 10 women; ages 19–27, *M* = 22.1 years) in summer 2014.[2] Criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) was employed to collect data from young Azerbaijanis who self-identify as part of "the opposition" or as being critical of the regime. Research assistants, themselves identifying as "oppositional" and veterans of the opposition community, estimate that at the time this population included between 300 and 400 youth (smaller than in the recent past, reflecting the increasingly challenging political environment). Recruitment efforts in such a small population were not difficult—this is truly an "everyone knows everyone" environment, and word spread quickly. Research assistants attempted to recruit participants with a wide variety of

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[2] The first author is a North American woman with intermediate skills in the local languages and more than 15 years of experience in the region. She worked with a local research assistant, identifying as "oppositional" in each interview to aid in interpretation and build rapport. Nonetheless, cultural differences abound, and the first author took care to be thoughtful about participants' needs.

oppositional organizational affiliations, ages, social classes, genders, and residences. See Table 1 for descriptive anonymized information on participants.

Table 1. Descriptive Data for Interviewees.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation
F1	19	Female	Student
F2	19	Female	Student
M1	19	Male	Student
M2	19	Male	Student
F3	20	Female	Blogger
F4	20	Female	Student
F5	20	Female	Student
F6	20	Female	Student
M3	20	Male	Student
M4	20	Male	Student
F7	21	Female	Recent university graduate
M5	21	Male	Student
M6	21	Male	Student
M7	21	Male	Student
F8	22	Female	Student
M8	22	Male	Recent university graduate
M9	22	Male	Student
M10	23	Male	Unemployed
M11	23	Male	Unemployed
M12	24	Male	Medical student
M13	24	Male	NGO worker
M14	24	Male	Lawyer
M15	24	Male	Journalist; IDP
F9	25	Female	Medical professional
M16	25	Male	Unemployed
M17	25	Male	Student; IDP
M18	25	Male	Unemployed
F10	26	Female	Teacher
M19	27	Male	Journalist; IDP

Note. NGO = nongovernmental organization. IDP = internally displaced person.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, we developed a codebook reflecting expected themes related to the research questions. Then we conducted qualitative content analysis using the analytical software Dedoose, whereby participants' data were used to refine emergent themes related to the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Line-by-line coding of each transcript was employed using *complete thoughts* as the unit of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). First, two authors coded two

transcripts; then they discussed and refined the codebook. Next, the first author coded all remaining interviews completely, and the second author reviewed and confirmed coding. Finally, excerpts were exported into metamatrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify patterns in responses across participants.

Findings

Young Azerbaijani Dissidents' Strategies for Engaging With Peers

Few participants said they were fully open about their political beliefs and behaviors in both online and off-line spaces; some hide their beliefs completely, but most make strategic decisions about political visibility, especially socially mediated visibility, based on how open-minded they anticipate their peers to be.

Nonvisibility Strategy: Self-Censorship

While the literature indicates that most people engage in self-censorship with regard to socially mediated political visibility, that was not the case with most of this study's participants. Exceptions, such as M2, explicitly chose to not discuss politics online, and few respondents engaged in self-censorship with their peers (although they did engage in self-censorship with other categories of social ties; see Pearce & Vitak, 2016). However, participants lamented their less politically active friends who engaged in self-censorship. This may not be unusual; Thorson (2014) found a large divide between young Americans who wanted to talk about politics on social media and those who actively engaged in protective strategies to avoid it. The same phenomenon likely exists in Azerbaijan.

Visibility Strategies

Participants engaged in other strategies to manage political visibility to peer audiences. For example, participants employed targeted visibility strategies that allow one to control visibility through technical tools such as friend lists (Vitak & Kim, 2014). Some participants did this by having two profiles on the same site: a nonpolitical profile and one for those who were aware (and were perceived to be accepting) of the individual's political views. Although the former type of profile was predominantly used to manage family relationships (Pearce & Vitak, 2016), the nonpolitical profiles were also used to maintain ties with disapproving friends. Similar multiple profile strategies have been found with Singaporean gang members (Lim, Vadrevu, Chan, & Basnyat, 2012), Egyptian youth activists (Yaghi, 2015), and LGBT+ social media users (Blackwell et al., 2016; Owens, 2017).

For young Azerbaijani dissidents, having multiple profiles reduces stress and allows users to feel more comfortable regarding political visibility. F6 explained why having two profiles worked for her: "I felt like I didn't really want anyone to bother me about politics so I decided to have these two profiles." Instead of managing two profiles, F8 decided to deactivate her old profile and start an entirely new one for "some classmates, one friend of mine, and then people I know from [oppositional organization] and other [oppositional] organizations." When asked whether anyone from her old profile inquired about the

deactivation, she replied: "I just tell them I stopped using it [Facebook]. I tell them to write me on WhatsApp." However, those with two profiles engaged in a great deal of labor to manage the two—defriending people on one, adding them to the other, inventing innocuous reasons why a new profile was created, and so on.

The motivation for having multiple profiles was obvious to those doing it. For example, M1 explained his "new" profile, which did not include his classmates or people from his neighborhood:

> I felt they would stop my progress. I already knew what their reaction would be: classic stuff like "Don't you have anything else to do?" "Don't play state with the state." . . . In my old profile, nothing is happening there. I don't share anything. In the new profile, I ignore my old friends. They are not there. . . . In that profile I only share big events— my [relative] was born, I was accepted to university, I finished the school year. I give a picture of a normal person, but a very passive one on social media.

Peers are placed in the new profile depending upon their "readiness"—this could be peers who are also politically minded, when a participant believed a peer was ready to learn the information, or when they believed spreading the message to those not already politically inclined could be a recruitment technique.

Participants had varying and sometimes elaborate strategies for shifting peers to their "political" profile. Slow visibility of information—to allow the audience to make metainferences (Leonardi, 2014)— were often employed in this process. Such staging is common in relational development (Dindia, 1998)— these "testing the waters" posts allow for the boundaries of communication to gradually relax or tighten, based on the target's reaction (Petronio, 2002), including on social media (Blackwell et al., 2016; Fox & Warber, 2015; Owens, 2017). In fact, social media may be an easier space for staging because of metainferences. These social media–provided clues give audience members opportunities draw conclusions about their connections.

Risks and Benefits Related to Young Azerbaijanis' Political Visibility

As noted earlier, there are many relational risks associated with political visibility, and these risks are elevated in authoritarian regimes, where there is more surveillance and severe consequences for political dissent. At the same time, these young people may only be able to achieve certain benefits by increasing political visibility. To address RQ2, below we summarize the main risks and benefits identified by our participants.

Risk: Abusive Comments

Many participants described receiving negative or abusive comments from peers as a result of socially mediated political visibility. Some were less abusive queries, such as F3 describing messages from her university classmates "questioning on everything I posted on Facebook." Similarly, M2 gave examples of typical negative responses he received digitally:

So I write something political, I share something political, they go in there to that post and write stupid stuff . . . they'll write something like "Nothing will change." "Are you going to build a revolution here?" You know, the usual sentences of people that don't agree with us.

F6 said her university classmates tell her things both online and off-line such as, "'Why do you bother with this?'—they tell me this in Inbox. When I meet with them and try to talk to them about these things, they said, 'Don't bother with that stuff, don't be active.'" M3's classmates often commented, "Why do you do this?" and "You're gonna get arrested."

For some participants, comments about being arrested were typical. M10 described how his friends would "say the usual thing, 'you're gonna get arrested.'" And when asked where this occurred, M10 said that "they comment, they say it in person, they send in private messages . . . everywhere, receiving both off-line and online abusive comments." By themselves, such comments posed minimal risk, but participants understood they could spiral into greater consequences, such as ending relationships and interference from authorities.

Risk: Relationship Turbulence and Dissolution

Azerbaijani youth monitor and assess how beneficial their friendships are, and social media aid in this. Participants reported that after peers were exposed to their political content, some chose to disassociate with participants. This occurred both online and off-line. As M17 explained about off-line disassociation, "Some people won't associate with me now because I'm an opposition activist. Some of them try to be physically apart from me." Yaghi (2015) found the same type of disassociation with young Egyptian dissidents.

Far more often, participants experienced digital dissolution, defriending, perhaps serving as a proxy for off-line dissolution. In Azerbaijan, political discussion is so threatening that it motivates defriending: Defriending signals a severing of the relationship because of visibility of the association with the individual—as Lim et al.'s (2012) gang member participants described, everyone sees that you are friends with the "wrong" person. M5's childhood friends told him they believe that *they* will be arrested because of his political activities.

But defriending was not always initiated by the peer to the participant. Some participants also chose to dissolve online ties. As F2 explained about her university classmates, "Sometimes they were defriending me. Sometimes I was defriending them. Sometimes they didn't like what I was writing. Sometimes I didn't like their reactions, so I defriended them." Sometimes the defriending was to shield oneself from negative comments. M15 engaged in such proactive defriending behavior: "I blocked those people I know are going to talk shit [to me]." When asked how he knew that they would do this, M15 said: "Well, I'd see other things they wrote on other posts of mine. They'd comment, send an Inbox message, tell me face-to-face." F3 explained: "I cut off all contact with schoolmates. [Interviewer: Why?] They were different from me. They're stupid. They were questioning everything I posted on Facebook."

But far more often, participants were on the receiving end of a defriending. M12 said that the majority of his university classmates defriended him, and for M10 this was especially the case during a presidential election campaign where political discussion and concerns were heightened. In F7's case, the threats to defriend occurred off-line:

> When I posted a lot about the [group] arrests, some of the people in my cohort said to me, in person, "If you don't stop this talk, we will defriend you." It was about my posts about mentality. And at some point my statuses were discussed in the class and I said, "If you don't like what I post, you can defriend me." I was angry at first but I got used to it, but it harmed my relations with my cohort. Right now I don't have proper relations with my cohortmates.

In this case, F7's online activities led to her being isolated in both online and off-line spaces.

Benefit: Finding Like-Minded People and Receiving Visible Support

Finding like-minded others and the potential for social support are two of the most commonly noted benefits of the Internet. Unsurprisingly, participants frequently noted that finding like-minded others and obtaining potential and visible (or active) social support through social media was beneficial. This is likely even more important with the lack of freedom of assembly as well as young women's limited mobility in Azerbaijan (Pearce & Vitak, 2016). Some participants actively sought out like-minded people online—and connecting with them was significant. M18 explained:

> The biggest benefit [to my online political activity] is the new circle that I got. These are free-minded people that I can talk with and discuss things freely. It is interesting for me to have these people around me, to be friends with them, because I never had such a circle. At the university there were only a few people with the same mind-set. In the military there was no one. But here there is a social circle. It is interesting for me . . . there are no borders around what we speak about. There is no taboo. Unlike with my classmates, neighborhood friends—they're all not like this.

M15 echoed M18, saying, "The biggest benefit [to my online political activity] is being around active, smart, cool people . . . sincere people. Finding friends, finding people of the same mind-set." And these relationships are incredibly important. F1 described them as a "second family," and F4 described her organization's headquarters as her "second home." This active support of one's political beliefs from these peers is valuable. As M16 said, "Finding new like-minded people is sort of like an incentive to be involved."

Benefit: Invisible Support

Visible or active support was not the only support, as many participants noted what we label invisible support. Our meaning of invisible support is not the same as Bolger, Zuckerman, and Kessler's (2000) invisible support—where the recipient does not interpret the support as support, as with nonverbal acts of caring such as helping with housework. Rather, these types of interactions reflect less visible or

invisible support when the alleged supporting party cannot safely express support or feels that the risks of providing visible support are too great.

We found two types of invisible support: enacted and perceived. Enacted (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002) support includes acts of support intentionally made less visible (as in expressing political support face-to-face rather than on social media). For example, M6's classmates "tell me [that they support me] face-to-face, but they are concerned about writing this sort of thing on Facebook."

The second type of invisible support observed in the study is perceived support (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), specifically relating to political views. Given that validation of one's beliefs may be especially important for individuals expressing minority political opinions in this context, we argue that the inclusion of perceived but invisible support within political support is appropriate. So while M6 had evidence of support, albeit not articulated in socially mediated spaces, many participants implied that their social media audiences "support" them with *no* evidence. This is an important particularity to an authoritarian environment where the fear of expressing even minor criticism against the ruling regime has severe consequences. In Azerbaijan, it is not uncommon for opposition leaders to imply that "the people" are with them, despite the ruling regime's claim of massive popular support (common in authoritarian regimes; Schatz, 2009). This is most frequently evoked when discussing the potential for revolution— arguing that the common people will rise up and join the opposition. Yet there is no evidence of "the people's" support outside of their political apathy and lack of criticism of the regime. The absence of evidence could even imply satisfaction with the status quo. Interestingly, this sense of unsubstantiated support was echoed by participants when discussing their social media audience. For example, M18 said he believes that "even if they don't like or comment, they read it and they agree with me." M15 felt that such individuals are protecting themselves, reinforcing the notion that some support cannot be visible, or like M9's classmates who he believed "support me but they are afraid."

In some cases, visible and invisible support—both perceived and realized—are copresent. M4 described receiving both types of support from his network: "There are four or five people who support me [online]—share my stuff. Others don't show a reaction but maybe in their hearts, they support me." Such a blending of support allows a wider audience of peers to engage with the political visibility and validate the participant's beliefs while retaining control over their own vulnerability.

Benefit: Informing People, Advocacy

Similar to Mor et al.'s (2015) finding that young Israelis were willing to take on great risk for the benefits of spreading their political views through social media, young Azerbaijani dissidents largely posted political content online to share information with (1) like-minded others and (2) less engaged peers— especially those who are perceived to be invisibly supportive. Like-minded others "already know about things," explained M12, but for many participants, sharing political content online provided a means to demonstrate commitment to the cause. For the second audience (less engaged peers), M16 explained,

> I try to show them that these kind of things are happening [here]. I want them to read
> these things. I want them to have knowledge. Maybe they already know, but maybe

> they don't. So I am writing stuff to them. And I hope to make them be active. It
> [writing] is a way to persuade them to do something.

F3 was also motivated by sharing information: "I want to show people what is going on here. Even if people don't care. I want them to see the injustice." F7 believed peers remained friends with her because they want to know what is going on but are scared to search for the information themselves. M3 explained that his friends cannot visibly inquire, and they "started asking questions about these things, like why people got arrested, what is happening, and updates. But they ask in private messages; they can't write this openly."

F1 articulated the costs and benefits of her posts by highlighting how her choice to be visible in her political opinions benefited her larger network by providing them with important information, even if it put her at personal risk.

> There are a lot of people that are negative [about her social media content]. My
> university classmates, they are saying, "This is stupid. Don't you have anything better to
> do?" but they're following it, they're getting informed. They know people are being
> arrested. [Interviewer: So even though they're negative, it is important for you that
> they see it?] Yes, it is the most important thing. Criticism is okay but the most important
> thing is that they know.

This belief is at the core of young Azerbaijani dissidents' decision-making process around political visibility, especially online. Although they recognize the risks of holding oppositional political beliefs and employ various strategies to reduce these risks, for many, their goal is advocacy. While social media make their political beliefs more visible to the authorities, it also spreads their message to their social networks and beyond.

Discussion and Implications

This study contributes to our understanding of socially mediated visibility in two important ways. First, it adds to the growing literature on marginalized populations' management of visibility, and, second, it considers the relational outcomes associated with the socially mediated visibility of risky political expression. In Azerbaijan, increased political visibility comes with both risks and benefits. Visibility's double-edged sword, frequently experienced by marginalized populations, was very much experienced in this case. Participants described receiving abusive comments and friendships ending due to political visibility, especially from socially mediated visibility. Yet for many participants, the benefits of finding like-minded others and associated support (even if invisible) as well as the ability to widely disseminate information were deemed worth the risks. This study demonstrates how socially mediated visibility functions in peer networks. As Edenborg (2017) argues, visibility is often idealized. While the narrative of "visibility = power" (see National Coming Out Day[3]; the encouragement of dissidents to broadcast their grievances) continues to resonate in particular circles, this study provides an example of the importance of

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[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Coming_Out_Day

contextualizing the norms, especially those related to power, in which individuals are encouraged to be more visible. In fact, in some cases, "visibility is not a promise of inclusion and belonging but may rather be associated with danger and insecurity" (Edenborg, 2017, p. 3). For these participants, visibility carried significant risks, although many were willing to bear those risks because of perceived benefits. The risks associated with visibility, moreover, are a tremendous deterrent to engaging in dissent or any other stigmatized or minority position. We wish to continue theoretically expanding on visibility conceptually and hope that this extreme case is a contribution to that line of inquiry.

The addition of invisible support is important. Theoretically it may be tied to frameworks such as preference revelation—a mechanism in which individuals make their private preferences known (Farrell, 2012)—as well as spiral of silence, where individuals self-censor potentially minority viewpoints out of fear or isolation or reprisal, but with a false sense of what others actually believe on the topic (see Fox & Warber, 2015). This study's participants had a sense that others shared their views but were unable to make them visible, especially on social media, and this belief was a driving motivation for continued visibility on the participants' parts. Also, this study added to the recent but growing literature on outcomes of political visibility, but with a relational orientation.

Visibility management is an important part of people's socially mediated lives. In this study, young Azerbaijanis, especially dissidents, must tread social media carefully and employ strategies to manage their visibility. This is easier said than done. Moreover, balancing the need for visibility for advocacy purposes and informing others with protecting oneself from potential risks is especially challenging.

Limitations

While acknowledging that this is a difficult-to-reach population, participant responses may be skewed to those willing to speak to a researcher. While the principal investigator went to great lengths to establish rapport with participants, it is possible that those not interested in participating may be those also unwilling to make their political attitudes visible. Additionally, without talking to the audience—those abusing or defriending political dissidents or those providing invisible support—we do not have the entire picture. Future research could explore this limitation, although methodological issues abound. Although these findings are not generalizable, we hope that they help further theorizing about visibility, mediated or otherwise, and power.

Conclusion

This study explored the strategies, risks, and benefits of socially mediated visibility and its relational outcomes in a politically marginalized population. Young Azerbaijani dissidents manage their socially mediated political visibility through targeted visibility to particular audiences as well as by using social media to facilitate slow visibility to enable metainferences and screen peers for readiness. The risks associated with visibility on social media include abusive comments and friendship dissolution. However, many dissidents opted to tolerate these risks because of visibility's benefits: finding like-minded people,

receiving visible and invisible support, and advocating for their causes. This case study demonstrates how problematic visibility can be—despite a dominant narrative of visibility being empowering.

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