Two experiments investigated when and how politicians’ Twitter communication affects the public’s cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions, focusing on the effects of message personalization. In Study 1, personalized (vs. depersonalized) messages significantly enhanced message recognition and recall, but they heightened perceived presence of and imagined intimacy with the candidate only among more affiliative individuals, while lowering the willingness to vote for him among less affiliative ones. In Study 2, although personalized messages improved message encoding and retrieval, they induced stronger perceived intimacy with and more positive evaluations of the in-group candidate only among those with weak party identification. By contrast, those attaching greater value to their party affiliation responded negatively to the personalized messages and showed robust in-group favoritism.


Perhaps one of the fastest-diffusing communication technologies in human history, social networking services (SNSs) have been mostly conceived of as a medium through which one can create and maintain interpersonal relationships (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Whether it be to meet new people they would not elsewhere or to stay in touch with those already within their offline interpersonal network, the extant literature has focused mostly on this relational function of SNSs among the equals, but a growing number of politicians have begun to utilize SNSs, Twitter in particular, as a privately owned publicity channel (Lassen & Brown, 2010). Unlike traditional media outlets, this personal broadcasting medium allows them to say just about anything, at any time, without worrying about unfortunate editing mishaps. What is more, their SNS messages often serve as raw materials for the mainstream media, enhancing their visibility in the public eye much beyond their followers or friends on SNSs (Lee & Jang, 2011).

Enticed by this unparalleled capacity to instantly engage voters in a more direct, personal, and potentially interactive manner, politicians have been at the forefront
of the adoption of SNSs. Especially in South Korea, Cyworld enjoyed its place in the spotlight during the mid-2000s, followed by what the media dubbed as “Twitter Craze,” with 77.3% of National Assembly members having activated an account as of November 2011 (Jun & Bae, 2011). In fact, with a nearly 30-fold increase in the number of Twitter users from approximately 210,000 in March 2010 to over 6.2 million as of March 2012 (OikoLab, 2012), Twitter has become a must-do for politicians such that the incumbent party even announced its plan to use the self-developed “Twitter Influence Index” as an official criterion when nominating general election candidates (Jin, 2012).

Despite the immense popularity of Twitter among politicians, however, little is known as to what makes Twitter a more effective campaign tool to inform the public of the candidate’s agendas, create emotional bonds with the electorate, and ultimately enhance the vote intention. By examining when and how politicians’ Twitter communication affects the public’s cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions, we aimed to extend the previous research as follows. First, mostly grounded in the uses and gratifications tradition, the effects of SNS use have been typically defined in terms of various social and psychological consequences the users experience as a function of the total amount of usage, with little attention paid to the specific nature of actual communications. One notable exception is Utz’s (2009) study, which found that people espoused more favorable attitudes toward the political candidate when he responded to the citizens’ comments on his SNS page than when he did not. By examining how variations in the message content (personalized vs. depersonalized) affect individuals’ reactions to a politician’s tweets, we aimed to put the message back in the communication process.

Second, we investigated how message personalization might interact with message recipients’ interpersonal orientation (Study 1). That is, adding a personal touch on otherwise plain policy statements might elicit more or less favorable reactions depending on how much the individual desires and values interpersonal connections and social activities (affiliative tendency; Mehrabian, 1970). To better understand the effects of message personalization and specify their boundary conditions, affiliative tendency was incorporated as a potential moderator.

Lastly, we examined how the candidate’s group identity (in-group vs. out-group) and the extent to which individuals value their party affiliation (party identification) might interact with message personalization (Study 2). According to the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE), the provision of personalizing information attenuates in-group favoritism by weakening the salience of the group identity (Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002). As such, personalized messages might engender less favorable reactions than depersonalized ones for in-group candidates by diluting their in-group privilege, whereas they might work in favor of opposite party candidates by suppressing out-group discrimination. Moreover, message variation might matter less for those placing a higher premium on their party affiliation (high identifiers) than those holding rather nominal group membership (low identifiers), as highs would rely more on the group identity as a heuristic
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cue in social judgment. By addressing how the candidate’s group identity and the participants’ party identification modify their reactions to personalized messages, we evaluated the applicability of the SIDE model in this nascent venue.

Study 1

With the media coverage increasingly focusing on personal aspects of political leaders and the “personality” or “image” taking precedence over “job qualifications” or “issue” in the public’s evaluation of politicians (Langer, 2007), it comes as no surprise that personalization prevails in political candidates’ campaigns. For example, when Tony Blair was seen in the kitchen “sipping tea from a mug, casually teasing his son about homework, and talking about the impact of his father’s illness and mother’s death on his political values,” Langer (2010) argues that he successfully “humanized his leader persona” and “gave experiential authentication to his views on education and the National Health Service” (p. 63).

Albeit intuitively appealing, the presumed advantages of personalized campaigns have not been subjected to much empirical testing, but rather inferred from the ever-increasing prevalence of personality-driven political campaigns and such media coverage of politics (Langer, 2007, 2010). Moreover, because the implications of “soft” campaigns have been mostly discussed in light of the dominance of TV as a source of political information, as opposed to print media (Keeter, 1987), it remains largely unknown how message personalization per se might influence the voters’ reactions controlling for other cross-media variations, such as modality. One exception is Han’s (2009) study, which showed that adding a short comment about how the requester used to live near a clean lake with his or her siblings not only led the participants to rate the campaigner more likeable, but also increased the likelihood of donation for the Clean Water Act. Although the study was conducted in a face-to-face context with a single message, such findings suggest that message personalization might indeed work in the campaigner’s favor.

Why personalize? Potential benefits of message personalization

One potential change message personalization might induce pertains to message processing. Although they used a different label, text-based interactivity, Warnick, Xenos, Endres, and Gastil (2005) found that when the website used first person address, active voice, and in situ photos of the candidate, people spent more time on the political candidate’s campaign website and recalled the issues better than those who viewed the website without such features. Two traditions of persuasion research seem to be relevant. First, research on self-referencing has shown that when persuasive messages prompt people to relate the incoming information to aspects of themselves (i.e., self-referencing), for example, by addressing them directly and encouraging them to remember their past experiences with the attitude object, it enhances message elaboration (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1995). Given that self-referencing occurs when individuals compare incoming information to self-relevant information stored
in their memory (Escalas, 2007), messages describing the candidate’s personal experiences might remind the readers of similar experiences and make it easier for them to build a psychological connection with the content or the source behind it, and thus facilitate more thorough cognitive processing.

Second, research grounded in exemplification theory (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000) has also shown that illustrative individual cases (exemplars) and stories draw greater attention and interest from the message recipients by virtue of their vividness, and thus exert significant influence on the participants’ reality perceptions than base-rate information (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994). Just like stories that are (a) based on a fewer number of individual cases and (b) “more concrete, more imagery provoking, and more colorful” than statistics (Baesler & Burgoon, 1994, pp. 584–585), personalized messages, representing only a single case, yet entailing more vivid episodic details about one’s experiences, might arouse greater interest in what politicians say and enhance the public’s awareness of their agenda, compared to generic, impersonal policy statements. Therefore, it was predicted that participants would (a) recognize the messages more accurately and (b) recall them better after reading the candidate’s personalized than depersonalized tweets (H1a-b).

Another potential merit of personalized messages is that they might induce the feelings of direct, face-to-face conversation with the candidate. Referring back to Short, Williams, and Christie’s (1976) definition of social presence as “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p. 65), a large volume of CMC research has adopted this construct to account for how mediation by technology alters various communication processes and outcomes. Most notably, the cues-filtered out perspective posits that the lack of nonverbal cues in text-based CMC weakens the salience of the partner’s presence in the immediate environment, and thus, makes it less appropriate for socioemotional communication than face-to-face interaction (Walther & Parks, 2002). Although researchers have focused mostly on technological aspects as major determinants of social presence, like channel bandwidth and immediate feedback capacity, Baym (2010) convincingly argues that factors such as familiarity with the medium, relational contexts, group identities, and individual proclivity also inevitably influence perceptions and behaviors in mediated interactions.

If social presence encapsulates the degree to which a given interaction approximates non-mediated communication with a real person (Nowak & Biocca, 2003), personalized messages might also promote such perceptions by simulating informal personal conversations more closely. For example, the power of narrative persuasion has been attributed to the state of transportation, “a state of cognitive and emotional immersion in a text” (Green et al., 2008, p. 513), which makes one’s story experience seem more like a real experience and leads people to create vivid mental images of and develop strong feelings toward the characters (Green & Brock, 2000). Considering that “the idea of feeling as if one is part of a narrative world is a common core that presence and transportation share” (Green et al., 2008, pp. 513–514), just as stories have greater potential to induce transportation than rhetorical materials (Green &
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Brock, 2000), personalized messages, by virtue of their semblance to a story, might help the readers to draw a vivid picture of the politician and feel as if they were directly conversing with him.

In a similar vein, personalized messages might also induce the illusion of intimacy with the politician, analogous to parasocial interaction (PSI) observed between media personalities and the audience. Often referred to as “intimacy at a distance” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215), PSI occurs when the media audience develops pseudo-friendships with media personalities they have never met in person. Even though media personalities’ interaction with the audience is inherently one-way and nonreciprocal, they can “claim and achieve an intimacy with what are literally crowds of strangers” by duplicating “the gestures, conversational style, and milieu of an informal face-to-face gathering” (pp. 216–217). Although empirical research on what exactly facilitates PSI with media characters is scant, Auter (1992) found that when a comedian stepped out of character and addressed the audience directly, viewers reported a higher level of PSI than did those having seen the same program with that part edited out. After all, given that “self-disclosure is one of the most powerful communication practices we have for building a relationship” (Baym, 2010, p. 128), personalized messages, however superficial the revelation is, might nonetheless foster imagined intimacy and emotional closeness with the target. Thus, it was hypothesized that participants would experience higher levels of (a) perceived presence of and (b) imagined intimacy with the candidate after reading his personalized than depersonalized tweets ($H_{2a-b}$).

Still, the ultimate goal of any political campaign would be to increase public support for the candidate. Although they did not manipulate the degree of message personalization, Thorson and Rodgers (2006) reported that the more participants perceived their experience as a simulation of interpersonal interaction after reading a politician’s blog, the more willing they became to vote for him. Likewise, Lee and Jang (2011) recently examined how exposure to a local politician’s microblog page, compared to a news article merely re-mediating his microblog messages, affects participants’ overall evaluation of him and their willingness to vote for him, and found that perceived presence of the target significantly enhanced both overall impressions and vote intention (Study 2). More directly germane to the present research, Han’s (2009) aforementioned study showed that those who heard the solicitor’s own personal experience as a backdrop for the campaign were more likely to make a donation than those who did not. Collectively, these findings suggest that message personalization might positively influence individuals’ behavioral intention by more closely mirroring face-to-face interpersonal encounter, leading to the prediction that participants will become more willing to vote for the candidate after reading his personalized than depersonalized tweets ($H_3$).

Such benefits of message personalization, however, are likely to be qualified by a host of source- and receiver-related factors. In particular, Study 1 focused on affiliative tendency as a receiver characteristic that might predispose individuals differently to personalized messages. Defined as “generalized positive expectations
in social relationships” (Mehrabian, 1994, p. 98), affiliative tendency refers to the preference for attachments (vs. independence) and group activities (vs. individual activities). Being outgoing and friendly, highly affiliative individuals also make greater efforts to affiliate with others and are more willing to talk to strangers (Miller, Rossbach, & Munson, 1981). Considering that more affiliative individuals not only hold more favorable attitudes toward social interaction, but also value the same trait in others (e.g., “I prefer a leader who is friendly and easy to talk to over one who is more aloof and respected by his followers”) (Mehrabian, 1994, p. 98), the hypothesized benefits of personalized messages might be more likely to be found among socially proactive individuals. By contrast, given that affiliative tendency is negatively correlated with (a) the extent to which individuals avoid social contacts and (b) the amount of discomfort and anxiety they experience in the presence of others (Mehrabian, 1994), politicians’ personalized tweets might instigate rather negative reactions from those shunning social opportunities. With no prior research to derive specific hypotheses from, however, the following research question was proposed: How will the effects of message personalization \((H1a-b \text{ through } H3)\) vary depending on the individual’s affiliative tendency \((RQ1)\)?

**Method**

**Participants**

One hundred and sixty-four current Twitter users (91 men, 73 women) who identified themselves as independents were recruited through an online survey company (age \(M = 32.90, SD = 7.58\)). They were randomly assigned to either the personalized or depersonalized message condition.

**Procedure**

Upon entering the study website, participants were informed that they would take part in a study on social media use. After filling out a short questionnaire not related to the current study, participants viewed the mock-up Twitter page. For added generalizability, half of the participants were told that the candidate represented the conservative ruling party (Grand National Party), while the other half believed that he belonged to the opposition party (Democratic Party). Out of the 12 messages shown, three were filler messages to increase plausibility (i.e., thanking a follower, retweeting a health tip, offering a link to a news article on the launch of apple vending machines in Tokyo). The subjects of the remaining posts were identical, but with different levels of personalization. Specifically, they concerned bipartisan policy issues collected from politicians’ actual personal homepages and Twitter pages, which could be used for candidates from both parties. Depersonalized tweets consisted of rather generic policy statements, raising concerns about the current situation and making a suggestion to address the problem (e.g., “The current district heating system is in need of adjustment. A thorough reassessment of the system’s problems, including the excessive heating rates, will have to be made from the consumer’s perspective,” “The toll of brutal crimes does not appear to be decreasing. Installing closed-circuit televisions in school zones, playgrounds, and other crime-ridden districts will help
to reassure the citizens of their safety”). Personalized messages dealt with the same issues, but were couched within personal experiences (e.g., “Just this morning, I was unpleasantly surprised upon opening this month’s heating bill. What lies behind the excessive rates is the problematic district heating system. A thorough reassessment of the system should be made,” “Because of the high number of brutal crimes, I no longer feel uncomfortable when a closed-circuit television catches my eye in public spaces. Instead, I feel reassured that I’m passing by a safe area.”). The message length was held equivalent between the personalized \((M = 78.50 \text{ characters}, \ SD = 23.57)\) and depersonalized \((M = 78.42, \ SD = 23.23)\) conditions. The fictitious candidate’s photo and name were blurred to avoid potential contaminating effects.

**Measures**

Message recognition and message recall were measured as indicators of the encoding and retrieval of messages, respectively (Lang, Newhagen, & Reeves, 1996). For message recall, participants listed as many subjects as they could remember from the candidate’s tweets (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). For message recognition, they were then given a list of eight public issues and asked whether or not the candidate had mentioned each issue \((\text{Yes} \ vs. \ \text{No})\).

Social presence was defined as how closely the virtual communication simulates face-to-face interaction (Nowak & Biocca, 2003): “I felt as if I were engaging in an actual conversation with the candidate,” “I felt like I was in the same room with the candidate,” “I felt as if the candidate was speaking directly to me.” \((1 = \text{strongly disagree}; 7 = \text{strongly agree})\).

For PSI, six items were adapted from Thorson and Rodgers’s (2006) PSI scale: “The candidate makes me feel comfortable, as if I were with a friend”; “If the candidate were going to be on television, I would watch that program”; “I would like to have a conversation with this candidate in person”; “The candidate seemed to understand the kinds of things I want to know”; “The candidate seems interested in my opinions and comments”; “I can trust the information I get from this candidate” \((1 = \text{strongly disagree}; 7 = \text{strongly agree})\).

Two items measured the vote intention: “I would like this candidate to run in the next election,” “I would vote for this candidate if he ran in the next election.” \((1 = \text{strongly disagree}; 7 = \text{strongly agree})\).

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations of Dependent Variables: Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Message recognition</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message recall</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.51*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social presence</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parasocial interaction</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>0.72*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote intent</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.54*</td>
<td>0.65*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .001.
For affiliative tendency, we used a revised version of Mehrabian’s (1970) original scale, adapted for Korean respondents (Cha & Cheong, 1990) (1 = represents me very poorly; 7 = represents me very well): “When I’m not feeling well, I would rather be with others than alone,” “I like to make as many friends as I can,” “I prefer independent work to cooperative one,” “I like hanging out with others because it helps me make friends,” “I prefer individual activities such as crossword puzzles to group ones,” “I would rather read a book or go to a movie than spend time with friends” (α = 0.70). Based on a median-split, participants were classified into either low (M = 3.48, SD = 0.57) or high affiliative tendency groups (M = 4.86, SD = 0.56).

Results

Manipulation check
To ensure that the messages were perceived as intended, participants were asked to evaluate the tweets they had read on the following items: nonintimate (1) – intimate (7), impersonal – personal, public – private (α = 0.62). An independent-samples t-test confirmed that personalized messages (M = 4.46, SD = 1.05) were rated as significantly more personal than the depersonalized ones (M = 4.01, SD = 0.95), t(162) = −2.86, p = .005. Additional one-sample t-tests showed that personalized messages were perceived as significantly more personal than the scale midpoint (4.00), t(84) = 4.02, p < .001, whereas depersonalized messages were not seen to be different from the neutral point, t(78) = 0.08.

Hypothesis tests
To examine how message personalization affects the participants’ message processing (H1a-b), jointly with the participant’s interpersonal orientation (RQ1), a 2 × 2 (message personalization × dichotomized affiliative tendency) multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed on message recognition and message recall, with the candidate’s party affiliation as a covariate. Consistent with H1a-b, personalized messages facilitated more thorough cognitive processing than did depersonalized messages, Wilk’s λ = 0.87, F(2, 158) = 12.13, p < .001. Univariate analyses showed that the participants not only recognized the issues more accurately after reading the personalized (M = 0.62, SE = 0.02) than depersonalized messages (M = 0.51, SE = 0.02), F(1, 159) = 10.36, p = 0.002, ηp2 = 0.06, they were also better able to recall the messages from the personalized (M = 2.00, SE = 0.15) than depersonalized version (M = 0.95, SE = 0.16), F(1, 159) = 23.13, p < .001, ηp2 = 0.13.

A 2 × 2 MANCOVA on the affective reactions (H2a-b), however, yielded a significant interaction between message personalization and affiliative tendency, Wilk’s λ = 0.94, F(2, 159) = 5.20, p = .006. For less affiliative individuals, the multivariate effect of message personalization was not significant, F < 1. By contrast, more affiliative individuals exhibited more favorable affective reactions to the personalized than depersonalized messages, Wilk’s λ = 0.88, F(2, 73) = 4.95, p = .01. Specifically, personalized tweets heightened perceived presence of the target (M = 3.96, SE = 0.23 vs. M = 3.15, SE = 0.23), F(1, 74) = 6.19, p = .02, ηp2 = 0.08, and fostered PSI (M = 4.02,
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\[ SE = 0.18 \text{ vs. } M = 3.20, SE = 0.19, F(1, 74) = 9.94, p = .002, \eta^2_p = 0.12. \] Therefore, \( H2a-b \) were supported only for more affiliative individuals.

\( H3 \) predicted that message personalization would increase the willingness to vote for the candidate. Again, a 2 × 2 analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on vote intention yielded a significant interaction between message personalization and affiliative tendency, \( F(1, 159) = 6.40, p = .01, \eta^2_p = 0.04 \). Simple effect tests showed that less affiliative individuals preferred the candidate who wrote depersonalized (\( M = 3.70, SD = 1.04 \)) than personalized tweets (\( M = 3.19, SD = 1.31 \)), \( F(1, 160) = 4.40, p = .04, \eta^2_p = 0.03 \). Although more affiliative individuals expressed stronger vote intention after reading the personalized (\( M = 4.08, SD = 1.12 \)) than depersonalized messages (\( M = 3.62, SD = 1.19 \)), the difference fell short of statistical significance, \( F(1, 160) = 3.11, p = .08, \eta^2_p = 0.02 \). When the interaction was decomposed for each message condition, more and less affiliative individuals responded similarly to depersonalized messages, \( F < 1 \), but those high in affiliative tendency were more willing to support the candidate than lows in response to the personalized tweets, \( F(1, 160) = 12.21, p = .001, \eta^2_p = 0.07 \).

Discussion

Study 1 examined how message personalization might affect the public’s reactions to a politician’s Twitter communication, independently and jointly with the message recipient’s affiliative tendency. First, although the gist of the messages was identical, when they were presented in reference to the candidate’s personal experiences, participants became more attentive to the messages and processed them more thoroughly. Just as illustrative individual cases draw greater attention and interest from the message recipients by virtue of their vividness (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994) and narratives enhance message elaboration (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1995), personalized messages seem to have aroused greater interest by conveying more story-like episodic details, indicating that message personalization can be an effective strategy to inform the public of policy agendas.

As compared to the across-the-board cognitive effects, however, message personalization exerted rather limited effects on the participants’ affective reactions. Specifically, personalized messages elicited a stronger sense of direct conversation with the candidate and the illusion of intimacy, but only among those positively predisposed toward social engagement. Those who prefer solitude and tend to avoid social activities did not feel any closer to the candidate just because the messages were garnished with some bland personal episodes. In fact, they showed just the opposite tendency, indicating a stronger willingness to vote for the candidate who posted the depersonalized tweets. Given the null effect of message personalization on affective reactions among less affiliative individuals, it remains unclear why they became less supportive of the candidate in response to personalized messages, but the current results suggest that message personalization can backfire with those less craving for interpersonal connections.
Although Study 1 empirically validated the often presumed advantages of message personalization, and furthermore, identified some boundary conditions for such effects, it is not without limitations. First, it did not take into account one of the key heuristics guiding individuals’ political decisions: party affiliation. Despite its declining influence in elections, party affiliation still serves as one of the major predictors of individuals’ vote choice (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). As such, the candidate’s group identity (in-group vs. out-group) might prime individuals’ reactions to his tweets substantially, possibly modifying, if not completely overriding, the message personalization effects in one way or another. Second, participants’ affective reactions were measured in terms of social presence and PSI, but one might argue that social presence is a value-free construct, for it represents how closely the mediated interaction emulates face-to-face interaction without explicitly telling how good or bad the virtual encounter is. In addition, social presence seems to have conceptual overlap with PSI, as both concepts touch upon the participant’s perceptions of the target as a relational object, rendering message personalization more relevant to the judgments at hand. Therefore, Study 2 was conducted to examine (a) if message personalization alters the participants’ perceptions of the candidate beyond perceived immediacy and intimacy, (b) even when the candidate’s group identity enters in the equation as another source of variance in their reactions to his tweets.

Study 2

According to SIDE, the depersonalizing context, often associated with anonymity and reduced individuating cues in CMC, can render group identity more salient by diluting interpersonal differences within a group, and thus facilitate group-oriented perceptions and behaviors (Postmes & Spears, 2002). Consistent with this notion, the activation of gender stereotypes led to self-stereotyping, but such effects dissipated when participants had exchanged personal information (Postmes & Spears, 2002, Study 2). Likewise, after exchanging brief personal profiles with anonymous CMC partners, participants were less likely to identify with other discussants as their group members and conformed less to the group norms (Lee, 2008).

If the provision of personal information attenuates the effects of group identity, personalized tweets might alleviate in-group favoritism; that is, the preference for in-group over out-group candidates might become less pronounced when the candidate’s messages allow a peek into his personal life. Another, perhaps more interesting, possibility is that personalized messages might invite opposite reactions depending on the candidate’s group identity. For an opposition party candidate, message personalization might work in her favor, as people come to see her as a unique individual, rather than a member of the rival party. For the same reason, personalized messages might work against an in-group candidate, as people become less likely to invoke her in-group status as a judgment criterion, compared to when no personal cues are available.
However, one critical, yet often overlooked, proviso for the SIDE effects is, “provided that group identity is salient” (Spears et al., 2002, p. 96). That is, the lack of individuating cues would not automatically trigger group-based cognitions and behaviors, but instead facilitate group-oriented responses among those to whom the focal group identity is salient, either temporarily or chronically. For example, when asked to choose a working partner, participants preferred the one attending the same than a different university, but only when they strongly identified with their home university (high identifiers) and received no individuating information (Tanis & Postmes, 2003, Study 3). Similarly, Lee (2007) reported that the lack of personal information encouraged stereotype-consistent conformity behaviors only among gender-typed individuals. As such, it seems reasonable to predict that the effects of the candidate’s group identity, either as an independent variable or as a moderator of message personalization effects, will be more likely to be found among those with stronger party identification. However, because the previous SIDE research has focused on how personalizing contexts moderate the effects of group identity, not vice versa, the following questions were proposed: How will a politician’s personalized tweets affect the participant’s (a) cognitive, (b) affective, and (c) behavioral reactions in conjunction with his group identity and the participant’s party identification (RQ2a-c)?

Method

Participants

Three hundred and five current Twitter users (180 men, 125 women), supporting either the Grand National Party or the Democratic Party, were recruited through an online survey company (age $M = 35.07, SD = 7.96$). They were randomly assigned to a 2 (personalized vs. depersonalized message) × 2 (in-group vs. out-group candidate) between-subjects design experiment and followed the same procedure as in Study 1. At the end, they were asked to identify the candidate’s party affiliation and only those who gave the correct answer ($N = 269, 88.2\%$) were included in the analyses.

Measures

For party identification, participants rated both Grand National Party and Democratic Party on the following items: immoral (1) – moral (7), untrustworthy – trustworthy, incompetent – competent, dishonest – honest. By subtracting the participants’ evaluations of the rival party ($\alpha = 0.95$, $M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.18$) from those of the party they support ($\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.96$), party identification score was computed. Because supporters of the Democratic Party ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 1.36$) exhibited stronger party identification than those of the Grand National Party ($M = 0.95$, $SD = 0.93$), $t(199.08) = -5.86, p < .001$, participants were median split within each party into low- and high-identification groups.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations of Dependent Variables: Study 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
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<th>α</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Message recognition</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2. Message recall</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.33*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Parasocial interaction</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Source evaluation</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.67*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Vote intent</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.76*</td>
<td>0.67*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .001.

Since a factor analysis yielded a single-factor solution (Eigen value = 5.24, % of variance accounted for = 58.26%), scores were averaged. The remaining variables were measured the same way as in Study 1 (see Table 2).

Results

To investigate how message personalization works with the candidate’s group identity and the participant’s party identification to affect message processing (RQ2a), a 2 × 2 × 2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was computed on message recognition and recall. Replicating Study 1, only message personalization had a significant multivariate effect, Wilk’s $\lambda = 0.97$, $F(2, 260) = 4.66$, $p = .01$. Specifically, the participants recognized the messages more accurately after reading personalized ($M = 4.53$, $SE = 0.14$) than depersonalized messages ($M = 3.99$, $SE = 0.15$), $F(1, 261) = 7.06$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2_p = 0.03$, and retrieved them better from the personalized ($M = 1.38$, $SE = 0.10$) than depersonalized version ($M = 1.06$, $SE = 0.11$), $F(1, 261) = 5.11$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2_p = 0.02$.

To address RQ2b, which concern the effects of message personalization on affective reactions, a 2 × 2 × 2 MANOVA was computed on PSI and source evaluation and yielded a significant three-way interaction, Wilk’s $\lambda = 0.98$, $F(2, 260) = 3.30$, $p = .04$. For low identifiers, there was a significant interaction between message personalization and the target’s group identity, Wilk’s $\lambda = 0.92$, $F(2, 128) = 5.89$, $p = .004$. Decomposition of the interaction showed that personalized messages garnered more positive affective reactions than depersonalized ones, only when attributed to the in-group candidate, Wilk’s $\lambda = 0.78$, $F(2, 65) = 8.93$, $p < .001$, with no corresponding difference for the out-group candidate, $F < 1$ (see Figure 1). On the other hand, the in-group candidate was seen in a more positive light than his out-group counterpart, only when personalized messages were shown, Wilk’s $\lambda = 0.79$, $F(2, 63) = 8.36$, $p = .001$. With depersonalized messages, the target’s group identity had no significant multivariate effect, $F < 1$.

For high identifiers, however, only the main effects for message personalization, Wilk’s $\lambda = 0.94$, $F(2, 131) = 3.86$, $p = .03$, and group identity were statistically significant, Wilk’s $\lambda = 0.84$, $F(2, 131) = 12.76$, $p < .001$. High identifiers perceived greater intimacy with the target ($M = 3.98$, $SE = 0.15$ vs. $M = 3.44$, $SE = 0.13$) and evaluated him more positively ($M = 4.63$, $SE = 0.11$ vs. $M = 4.30$, $SE = 0.10$)
after viewing depersonalized (vs. personalized) messages, \( F(1, 132) = 7.20, p = .008, \eta_p^2 = 0.05; F(1, 132) = 5.31, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = 0.04 \). They also felt stronger intimacy with \((M = 4.21, SE = 0.14 \text{ vs. } M = 3.21, SE = 0.15)\) and gave more positive ratings to the target \((M = 4.74, SE = 0.10 \text{ vs. } M = 4.19, SE = 0.11)\) when his group identity matched than mismatched their own, \( F(1, 132) = 25.00, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.16; F(1, 132) = 14.80, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.10 \).

Lastly, a \( 2 \times 2 \times 2 \) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on vote intention (RQ2c) yielded a significant interaction between the candidate’s group identity and party identification, \( F(1, 261) = 10.77, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.04 \). Simple effect tests showed that although low identifiers expressed stronger support for the in-group \((M = 4.08, SD = 0.15)\) than out-group candidates \((M = 3.56, SE = 0.15)\), \( F(1, 265) = 6.36, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = 0.02 \), such in-group favoritism was more pronounced for high identifiers \((M = 4.45, SD = 0.14 \text{ vs. } M = 2.95, SD = 0.15)\), \( F(1, 265) = 51.48, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.16 \). The significant main effect for group identity should be interpreted in light of this interaction, \( F(1, 265) = 46.65, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.15 \).

Discussion
To enhance ecological validity of the findings from Study 1, Study 2 investigated the joint effects of message personalization with the candidate’s group identity and the participants’ party identification. In keeping with SIDE, the tendency to see the in-group candidate in better terms than the out-group one was observed more consistently among those with stronger party identification. Message personalization, however, failed to induce uniformly positive outcomes on measures other than message recognition and recall.

Of particular interest is that message personalization had opposite effects on affective reactions for high and low identifiers. First, those with stronger party identification responded negatively to personalized messages. In the case of the in-group candidate, the result comports well with SIDE, as personalization could have rendered his group membership less salient and thus attenuated his in-group privilege. What remains unclear is that such effects were observed for the out-group candidate as well. One possibility is that those attaching greater value to their party affiliation might be the ones who have greater interest in and are more committed to politics in general. Contrary to falling for personal tidbits thrown in merely
as a backdrop of political statements, more politically involved individuals might have found the candidate to be less public-minded when his messages centered mostly on issues of personal relevance, leading to the feeling of disconnection and more negative evaluations. Another possibility is that high identifiers might have employed a more critical thought process due to their stronger involvement in politics. Given that (a) analytical elaboration “turned off” the favorable persuasive effect of narrative transportation with weak ad arguments (Escalas, 2007, p. 425) and (b) exemplars are generally viewed as a weak form of arguments due to their lack of generalizability (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994), high identifiers might have responded more harshly to the personalized messages because they engaged in more analytical message processing, beyond what could have been captured in simple recognition and recall tests. Although these conjectures could not be directly tested, the results indicate that message personalization should be tactfully executed in consideration of the political proclivities of the audience.

On the other hand, personalized messages induced stronger PSI with and more positive evaluations of the candidate for low identifiers, but only for the in-group candidate. Put differently, in-group favoritism was observed only when the messages were personalized. At first blush, these findings seem to contradict the SIDE notion that personalization will interfere with group-based perceptions and behaviors, but it merits note that such effects were found among those to whom party identity is not normally salient, failing to meet the prerequisite for SIDE effects. For such individuals, personalized messages seem to have temporarily heightened the cognitive involvement in the politician’s messages (as reflected in better recall and recognition), prompting them to utilize available cues they might have ignored otherwise, like the target’s group identity, in their judgments of an unknown candidate. Considering that vote decision is likely to demand more cognitive involvement than the expression of personal feelings, the fact that even low identifiers preferred the in-group candidate in their vote decision seems to comport well with this conjecture. Albeit speculative, this seemingly ironic possibility that message personalization might activate in-group favoritism for less group-centered individuals deserves further investigation, as it redirects our attention to the undertheorized half of the SIDE model, whose focus has been on the cases with a strong group identity.

It also merits note that in the SIDE tradition, (de)personalization was typically conceptualized as a unique characteristic of the interaction context, rather than an attribute of the message. In this view, one might argue that the present context was overall highly depersonalizing, as the candidate’s party affiliation was the only, and thus most prominent, identity cue made available before the participants viewed his Twitter page. If so, the findings that (a) high identifiers attributed greater intimacy to and gave higher ratings to the in-group candidate and (b) both low and high identifiers were more willing to vote for the in-group candidate can be seen as supporting SIDE, as they demonstrated robust in-group favoritism in a depersonalizing context. Therefore, to better understand how “group” identity might operate within this “personal” medium, it seems necessary to examine how factors
such as the pre-existing knowledge about the target and message content might prime readers’ mindsets differently, in a more or less group- or person-centered fashion.

**General discussion**

In summary, the present experiments demonstrated that message personalization can garner positive outcomes for political candidates who turn to microblogging services to publicize their agendas and establish a positive public image, but often in conjunction with the message readers’ interpersonal and political predispositions. Personalized messages were more likely to draw the participants’ attention and augment message processing, but they heightened the feeling of direct interaction and perceived intimacy only among more affiliative individuals (Study 1). Moreover, for less socially active individuals, message personalization had either no effects (affective reactions) or a negative effect (vote intention). Similarly, message personalization backfired with those with stronger party identification, eliciting negative perceptions and evaluations of the candidate, whereas it evoked emotional closeness with and positive appraisal of the in-group candidate from those with a weak party identity (Study 2).

Given the weak contrast between personalized and depersonalized messages, the present findings seem to underscore the importance of message framing in politicians’ Twitter communication. Specifically, although personalized messages touched upon the candidate’s personal experiences and feelings, they still centered on public issues, as opposed to the candidate’s private persona. Although this was to hold the subjects of the messages constant, and thereby avoid any confounds associated with them, such a minimal approach might have suppressed message personalization effects. For example, messages reflecting one’s most personal moments, like commemorating his or her deceased mom, might be more effective in alleviating mistrust toward out-group candidates than strengthening emotional bonds with in-group candidates. Alternatively, people might find the out-group candidate’s intimate self-disclosure rather uncomfortable and respond negatively to such “oversharing” (Baym, 2010). In a similar vein, highlighting their mundane day-to-day experience in order to depict themselves as a down-to-earth, approachable person who is no different from ordinary citizens, a strategy employed by most politicians, might work better for out-group candidates, as such information might dilute dissimilarity presumed by message recipients. These competing possibilities need to be assessed in future research by systematically varying the nature of message personalization.

The fact that message personalization evoked negative reactions from those with strong party identification bears important practical implications. Given that those who actually choose to follow politicians on Twitter and thus have higher chances of encountering their messages are the ones who are more involved in politics, holding clear party affiliation with greater values attached to it, the current results indicate that plastering messages with personal episodes might not be such a good campaign strategy, unless the candidates’ ultimate goal is to raise the public’s awareness of their agenda.
Although our findings highlight the boundaries of message personalization effects and hints at an interesting interplay between personal and group identities, some limitations need to be addressed. First, we used only textual variation to manipulate the level of message personalization, but when messages are personalized by other means, for example, accompanying pictures of the candidate, it might divert readers’ attention away from the verbal messages. In such a case, message personalization might hinder, rather than facilitate, the encoding and/or retrieval of the candidate’s agendas. Therefore, the effects of message personalization on the public’s awareness of the candidate’s issue positions should be cross-validated by employing different conceptual and operational definitions.

Similarly, we used a fictitious character as our target, about whom the participants had no prior expectations or attitudes. In reality, however, especially for high profile politicians whose Twitter communication would draw the mass media’s as well as the public’s attention, people are likely to have rather fixed preconceptions about them. If so, highlighting the candidate’s private persona through message personalization might evoke more polarized reactions in the direction of the pre-existing attitudes, rather than yielding uniformly positive or negative outcomes. Therefore, future research should examine how prior attitudes shape the public’s reactions to more or less personalized messages by employing high profile politicians as a target.

Lastly, message personalization might exert divergent effects depending on the medium through which the messages are conveyed. For example, people might consider it to be inappropriate for political candidates to share their personal stories in a newspaper interview, whereas such intimate disclosure might well be expected and deemed acceptable on Twitter or Facebook. By addressing how the communication channel might interact with one or more of the variables investigated herein, future studies should help to elucidate the unique advantages and disadvantages of Twitter as a part of the media mix for political campaigns.

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References


Politicians’ Twitter Communication

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