

JOIBS: April 2026. ISSN 2992-9253

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Review of Hu & Kirkegaard (2026)

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Funding: None.

Competing interests: None.

Citation: Redding, R. (2026). Review of Hu & Kirkegaard (2026). *Journal of Open Inquiry in the Behavioral Sciences*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.58408/issn.2992-9253.2026.05.01.0003>

This paper reports the results of an online survey that representatively sampled 978 Americans who answered a series of mental health and political ideology questions, designed to explore the relationship between mental health and political ideology. A secondary goal of the study was to explore the interrelationships between mental health, political ideology, and body modifications such as piercings, tattoos, or unnatural hair coloring. The current study was designed to advance our understanding of these associations by: (1) using a variety of measures of mental health, including asking respondents whether they had ever been given a psychiatric diagnosis, (2) evaluating whether leftist vs. non-leftist respondents interpret and answer mental health questions similarly, to make sure there is not measurement error in how we are assessing and comparing the mental health of leftists vs. non-leftists, and (3) examining whether there is a relationship between body modification, psychopathology, and political ideology, with the authors hypothesizing that leftists might be more open to doing things that deviate from the norm (since personality research has shown that they are more open to new experiences), which manifests itself in “concrete, visible” behaviors such as body modifications. Body modifications are also of interest because past research has shown them to be correlated with psychopathology.

The study found rather modest positive correlations between leftism and psychopathology, and also rather modest positive correlations between body modifications, leftism, and psychopathology. More importantly, the study found that the best measures of mental health for such studies were diagnoses, which also were more strongly related to leftism (particularly anxiety and ADHD), rather than self-reported symptoms. The authors explain that these findings are subject to several possible interpretations. Their interpretation is that diagnoses “are better measures in general and show stronger predictive validities and heritabilities across different traits . . . [they] are more valid predictors of leftism because they are simply better measures of psychopathology.” However, they also note the possibility that leftists may more readily seek mental health services than rightists and, thus, would be more likely to have in their history a psychiatric diagnosis. This interpretation is a strong possibility and should not be discounted. Research suggests that conservatives are often reluctant to seek mental health services because they perceive that psychologists will not understand and respect them or their values and concerns, along with an ethos in many conservative communities of self-reliance or reliance on

religion to solve one's problems (see Redding 2020; Redding & Satel, 2023). To address this possible confounding factor, future studies should ask participants whether they had ever sought mental health treatment (and if so, how much they received) and then co-vary out that factor in the analysis of political ideology and psychiatric diagnosis.

I have the following specific comments and suggests for the authors:

1. The paper does not follow APA style in terms of headings and overall formatting. In addition, the Abstract is a bit too long and includes the issue of body modification thrown in at the end without any explanation as to how that relates to the other issues addressed in the study. Finally, there are too many keywords listed, and it is not customary to include the recruitment platform used (Prolific) as one of the paper's keywords (surely, one of the most important aspects of the study is not that Prolific was used).
2. I found the "visual presentation" part of the paper's title to be unclear and confusing. I would suggest replacing that with something more specific and descriptive.
3. The writing needs some improvement. There are often long paragraphs packed with technical detail, making it is difficult to follow (and maintain reader attention and interest) in places. Moreover, the phraseology is often awkward and/or uses passive voice (e.g., "It can be observed that while . . ."; "The present study was able to confirm").
4. Figure 3 – Rather than presenting all the correlations (even those that are very small, e.g., .04) and then crossing out some in the table, I would suggest instead opting to report only meaningful correlations (e.g., correlations over .10), indicating that the table only reports those correlations.
5. Measurement of Mental Health – With respect to one of the measures of mental health created by the authors – the "23 items concerning people's negative feelings in the last 14 days" – no information is given as to how the measure was constructed.
6. (Measurement of Political Ideology – In addition to the 41-item survey created by the authors, why were the participants not also asked to rate their overall ideology (liberal to conservative) on a Likert scale?)
7. Results only need to be reported to the second decimal point – anything beyond that is meaningless.
8. Generally speaking, the Results section is very hard to follow and written in a somewhat odd hyper-technical fashion. Thus, the forest gets lost in the trees – i.e., it is a very densely packed technical discussion without providing an overall context for interpreting the results – i.e., why the results are important, which results are the most important, what the effect sizes are (e.g., are the correlations modest or sizeable?), how they link to the goals of the study, etc.

9. Generally speaking, the correlational and regression results pertaining to leftism, body modification, and psychopathology are fairly weak. The correlations are all .22 or less, and the R^2 s for the regressions are all less than .30. Given the relatively weak findings, the authors should address whether they are truly meaningful and informative.

References

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