Facebook and the Spiral of Silence: Examining the Social Media Dynamics among Female Students in Pakistan

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Objective: The aim of this study is to investigate the way in which female Facebook users engage in political discourse, aligning its inquiry with Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's seminal Spiral of Silence theory (1974). Focusing on key variables like participants' perceived opinion climate, willingness to express opinions, fear of social isolation, the research explores the dynamics within two distinct Facebook audience compositions: the expansive macro climate and the intimate micro-climate. The former encompasses a diverse range of connections, from old friends to online communities, while the latter involves daily interactions with friends, family, and significant others.

Methodology: Survey data (quantitative analysis) has been collected targeting university students in the federal capital and Rawalpindi.

Findings: This study corroborates earlier findings, affirming the presence of the Spiral of Silence phenomenon on Facebook. Notably, it reveals that Pakistani women who use Facebook are more likely to express themselves in micro groups with friends and relatives compared to macro-Facebook communities with lots of individuals.

Implications: The study confirmed that fear of isolation has a major impact on opinion expression in macro circles, and that opinion climate evaluation is significant for both circles.

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Introduction

People who might not have had the confidence or space to discuss their opinions publicly are said to have benefited from social media. In today's world, people value and recognize freedom of expression as a fundamental human right (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).
Opinion expression is seen as critical to the advancement of society. By exchanging ideas and knowledge, individuals, communities, and states foster comprehension of the larger world. Particularly when it comes to young women's political activity, new technology gives women the means to increase their political participation and establish a positive social standing (Schuster, 2017).

People have the ability to voice their opinions through blogs, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and several other platforms. Many contend, therefore, that social media still contains Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence. Based on two key assumptions, Noelle-Neumann (1973; 1977, 1984) developed the spiral of silence hypothesis to clarify the mechanisms controlling the creation of public opinion. First, people tend to interpret public opinion in a quasi-statistical manner determined by the sentiment of the majority. Second, considering the possible consequences of being a member of a minority group, people shift their conduct to align with the views of the general population. According to Walter et al. (2018), this behavioral adaptation can take the form of publicly agreeing with the majority perspective or choosing to remain silent, giving the impression of agreement while secretly rebelling.

Additionally, it is asserted that a variety of factors contribute to people's tendency to keep their opinions to themselves and to mute them on social networking sites. According to researchers like Gearhart and Zhang (2018), notions like the spiral of silence that are dependent on deliberative outlets need to be reevaluated in light of how new media has evolved. This study examines the spiral of silence hypothesis in regard to women and Facebook. This study's central hypothesis is that, although women may not feel comfortable expressing their opinions in large Facebook groups, they do so in smaller, more intimate circles of friends and family. Facebook is witnessed as replica of face-to-face communication. It provides almost all aspects of said setting. There are groups of friends as one can have in real life. There are large impersonal groups like larger social gatherings. People share their opinion and others like, share, and spread the word on social media. there are options of keeping silence, showing disagreement through emoticons or comments as well.

**Spiral of Silence**

Although it is ideal for minority perspectives to be spoken equally and freely, in reality, minority opinions are frequently ignored and eclipsed by majority opinions (Robinson, 2021). In 1974, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann offered a very helpful framework to explain this kind of event. Her method was based on compliance studies, particularly those conducted by Milgram (1963) and Asch (1951). According to Noelle-Neumann's theory of opinion manifestation, people's evaluation of the opinion environment before to voicing their opinions is a significant phenomenon. They choose whether to voice their opinions or remain silent on the matter after presenting their case (Masullo & Duchovnay, 2022). She made a few assumptions that served as the framework's foundation.

The topic of discussion should not only be contentious but also have strong moral implications (Matthes et al., 2018). It should go without saying that contentious moral issues will divide people's perspectives. Although spiral of silence theory was originally introduced in 1974 and pioneered by German politician and scientist, Noelle-Neumann, nevertheless roots of this concept are extended back to the general elections of 1965 and 1972 that took place in Germany. During the time of elections, Noelle-Neumann noticed a strange dissonance in cognition and behavior of general public. She found that apparently both political parties' i.e. Social Democratic and Christian Democratic candidates were equally being supported by their followers, however majority of people reported (when surveyed) that they are expecting the win of Social Democratic Party. This resulted in relatively increased public support for Social Democratic Party candidate and consequently, a huge number of individuals jumped on the band-wagon and switched.
towards the perceived winner’s side regardless of equal apparent support towards both political parties preceding the elections (Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

Afterwards, Noelle-Neumann developed the prime component of the theory i.e. hypothesis of silence when she encountered a student who was apparently supporter of Social Democratic Party, yet wearing a pin of Christian Democrat Party. The student claimed that she wore this pin just to witness the reaction of people. After a few days, the student took off the pin and reported that she felt it was an awful and dreadful experience to wear that in, so she removed the pin. Even though at that time, both political parties were seemingly receiving equal supporters, however the supporters of Social Democrat Party were more expressive in terms of their political affiliations an thus they were overshadowing the presence of Christian Democrats within the public sphere (Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

This theory was supported by Noelle-Neumann (1991), who linked the act of silencing to the idea of shame. She claimed that people's perceptions of contradictions in thought make them fearful of being in the minority and potentially embarrassing. He tends to remain silent out of fear. The theory's first section discusses the media's judgement of public opinion. The theory's next section addresses the hypothesis that people's motivation to openly voice their opinions is influenced by their assessment of the climate. The fear of social rejection and humiliation makes some decide to keep quiet. When a minority opinion is kept under wraps in public, it makes it seem even more absent. In this approach, the general consensus of opinion appears stronger than it actually is, while the viewpoint that is repressed will appear weaker than it truly is. As a result, public opinion is uniform. According to Noelle-Neumann (1977), people are still afraid of being alone in social situations. They enjoy being well-liked and accepted by others. According to Noelle-Neumann (1993), the fear of being alone prompts people to evaluate the political atmosphere in order to reduce the possibility of losing friends or being shunned and alone. She goes on to say that people use the opinion climate as a gauge, which helps them decide whether or not to voice their opinions about a particular topic.

**Women's Involvement in Political Discourses**

Gender equality and women's empowerment remain critical development issues in many countries worldwide. A significant democratic deficit is triggered by women's underrepresentation, compromising the credibility of the contemporary democratic ideal. Therefore, encouraging women in positions of decision-making and implementing parity democracy are important areas of action. The underrepresentation of women in various political capacities, such as voters, candidates, and members of political parties, is a longstanding issue in Pakistan. The country's Constitution established reserved quotas for women in reaction to this inequality, giving women 17 percent of the seats in the National Assembly and the Senate.

Evidence suggests that the home, not the community, is the main setting influencing women's involvement in politics. It is observed that a majority of women (58%) indicate engaging in political discourse within domestic settings. Conversely, the majority of men (54%) say they have conversations about politics with other men who are not family members. Additionally, we discover that men are important nodes that affect women's involvement in politics in the home; around 50% of women say they have discussed politics alongside the males who live there.

**H1:** Female Facebook users will be more likely to express their political opinions if they believe that they fall in the perceived majority opinion.

**H2:** Facebook users with a high fear of social isolation will be less likely to express their political opinions than Facebook users with a low fear of social isolation.

**Methodology**

The research on the Spiral of Silence has traditionally employed experimental methods or survey
techniques (Kennamer et al., 2009; Woong & Park, 2011; McDevitt et al., 2003; Moy, 2000 & Scheufle). The present study has focused on understanding the attitudes and behaviors of individuals, a survey methodology was chosen for collecting data.

**Sampling Technique and Strategy**
For sample selection, a stratified random sampling technique was applied. The survey was distributed to 400 female students studying political science or media studies at public universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The choice of these universities—Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, and the International Islamic University, Islamabad—was based on their exclusive female-only institutions, ensuring a simplified and focused sample selection process. This technique was selected to ensure a representative sample by stratifying based on academic disciplines and university locations. By doing so, the study aims to capture diverse perspectives within the targeted population, enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

**Data Collection**
The structured nature of the questionnaire allowed participants to self-administer, contributing to the efficiency of data collection. A total of 375 valid responses were received and will be subjected to further analysis in this study.

**Micro- and Macro-climate of Opinion**
It is well known that one's chance of voicing a potentially divisive opinion may differ depending on whether one expresses it in front of a small, close-knit group of friends or acquaintances versus a bigger, more impersonal gathering that consists primarily of strangers. Numerous academics conducted empirical tests to verify the concept of micro and macro climates of thought (Glynn & Park, 1997; Moy et al., 2001). Facebook's customisation function, which allows users to friend or follow people they want to stay in their social circle, has the potential to create a "opinion climate." According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), Cassidy (2006), and Smith (2009), Facebook provides a customizable feature that forms the foundation for fostering a "opinion climate." This feature allows users to friend or follow individuals they wish to remain in their social circle, and they can "like" pages and groups that they are interested in. To foster a desired opinion environment, on the other hand, undesirable opinions can be avoided by using the unfriend, unfollow, unlike, and block buttons. Facebook has a customisation feature that allows you to filter "friends" for a particular post and create circles within circles. Through the usage of similar data that users have previously opened to watch, read, share, or remark on, the artificial intelligence utilised in this application facilitates users' access to their favourite persons or content. Facebook's compliance may contribute to opinion dominance, as Noelle-Neumann (1974) suggested in her approach. Facebook has potential to create different types of opinion climates in terms of volume and magnitude. A circle of close friends, colleagues, acquaintances and family potentially formulates a 'micro climate of opinion' while a circle in large impersonal group where one doesn’t know many people in person, has a potential to create ‘macro climate of opinion’. These two entirely different opinion climates can be compared with each other to test spiral of silence on Facebook.

This study looks at the existence and characteristics of the Spiral of Silence on Facebook in order to analyse the factors influencing Facebook users' propensity to voice opinions regarding "political hate speech" during the 2018 Pakistani election in both their macro and micro circles—that is, their old friends, former contemporaries, more secluded links, infrequently contacted people, and the online only community.

**Measures**
**Opinion Expression**
Respondents were presented with a hypothetical situation designed to assess possible future
actions in micro climate, as follows:

**Micro Climate of Opinion**
Imagine you log in **your timeline and entre a group where you know everyone in person**. The most recent conversation focused on some topics pertaining to political figures, parties, and affiliations. Based on the responses and remarks using emoticons such as anger 😞, like 👍, laughter 😅 and so on, you might infer that the majority of people disagree with you. Some people might voice their ideas in a circumstance like this, while others would not. What actions you would take in this kind of circumstance.

**Macro Climate of Opinion**
Imagine you log in **your timeline and entre a group where you do not know everyone in person**. The text regarding political figures, parties, and affiliations is the subject of the most recent discussion. You can infer that the majority of people disagree with you based on the comments and reactions shown by emoticons like emoticons like anger 😞, like 👍, laughter 😅 and so on. Some individuals might voice their ideas in this kind of circumstance, while others would not. What actions you might take in such a circumstance.

Respondents were asked to rate on a 6-point Likert scale, from very unlikely to very likely, how likely they were to pursue each of five techniques including planned opinion expression. How likely are you to speak your mind in this kind of situation? \( M = 3.62, \ SD = 2.9 \) How probable is it that you will leave unbiased comments without sharing your true opinions? \( M = 4.34, \ SD = 2.8 \) How probable is it that you'll attempt to shift the conversation's subject? How likely are you to share a link endorsing your position \( M = 5.87, \ SD = 3.6 \)? How likely are you to go offline without saying anything? \( M = 6.47, \ SD = 2.7 \). 3.95 (M) and 3.5 (SD).

**Perceived Majority Opinion**
This measure was gauged on three items on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Most of my Facebook friends would express the same opinion as mine about such posts \( M = 46.08, \ SD = 20.8 \). I read comments below a post on Facebook, which contains content about political persons/parties/thoughts, before entering into a discussion \( M = 6.27, \ SD = 2.3 \). In six months or so, the opinion climate on Facebook will remain the same \( M = 6.71, \ SD = 2.2 \).

**Perceived Majority Opinion**
**H1:** Female Facebook users will be more likely to express their political opinions if they believe that they fall in the perceived majority opinion.

For both micro and macro-opinion climates, simple linear regression was used to ascertain the dependence of desire to express opinions on the perceived majority opinion climate. The following table presents an overview of Linear Regression Analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>( R^2 )</th>
<th>( F )</th>
<th>Sig. ((p))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macro Climate of Opinion</td>
<td>1.365</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>7.132</td>
<td>.011*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The linear regression was evaluated to predict “willingness to express opinion” on a political discussion based on the macro climate of opinion. The regression equation was significant \( F = 7.132, \ p = .001 \), with an \( R^2 \) of .051. Results in Table 1 indicate that females’ willingness to express opinion increased significantly in macro climate opinion. Thus, it is affirmed that macro
Climate of opinion is a significant predictor of females' willingness to express an opinion on Facebook.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>Sig. ($p$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived majority Climate of Opinion</td>
<td>.221</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>6.641</td>
<td>.010*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The linear regression was evaluated to predict “willingness to express opinion” on a political hate speech in micro climate of opinion. The regression equation was significant ($F = 6.641, p = .010$), with an $R^2$ of .051. Table 2 illustrates that participants’ willingness to express opinion is significant in micro climate of opinion. It is confirmed, then, that females' propensity to voice their opinions is significantly predicted by the microclimate of opinion. It makes the assumption that women are aware of other people's opinions and assess the atmosphere of opinion before forming their own. The primary finding of Noelle-Neumann (1974), that is, the willingness to voice one's views within the perceived opinion environment, was validated. The results show that when most women decided to voice their opinions on Facebook, they took the opinion climate into account. Furthermore, a multiple regression analysis conducted on the opinion macro- and micro-climates showed that only the macro-climate was significant enough to detect differences in the desire to express opinions.

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion Expression</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig.(2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macro Opinion Climate</td>
<td>1112</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>3.420</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro Opinion Climate</td>
<td>1112</td>
<td>1.273</td>
<td>1.300</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 explicates that a significant difference existed in the mean values of willingness to voice an viewpoint on a specific issue readiness to voice a viewpoint in a group of friends and acquaintances (M=2.67, SD=1.300) versus an impersonal group (M=2.43, SD=1.273), t = 3.420, $p = .002$). Therefore, compared to a big, impersonal group (macro group), people were more inclined to voice their opinions in a group of friends and acquaintances (micro group).

The perceived climate of opinion, which Noelle-Neumann (1974) identified as the primary determinant of readiness to express an opinion, was validated. The results of tests for both micro and macro-opinion climates show that the former is a significant predictor of the latter's propensity to voice opinions on political hate speech on Facebook. The theory holds true for opinion climates at both the micro and macro levels. According to test results, people's propensity to voice their opinions regarding political hate speech on Facebook is significantly predicted by the atmosphere of opinion. It makes the assumption that people are aware of other people's opinions and assess the atmosphere of opinions before forming their own. The results show that when most participants decided to voice their opinions on Facebook, they took the opinion climate into account.

**Fear of Isolation**

Simple regression was used to evaluate the relationship between "fear of social isolation" and "willingness to express opinion," and the results showed that fear of social isolation is a significant predictor of willingness to communicate a real opinion.
Table: 4
Predicting Willingness to Express Opinion from Fear of Social Isolation (FSI) in Macro Climate of Opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig. (p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Isolation</td>
<td>-.251</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>7.611</td>
<td>.004*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Simple linear regression was gauged to predict opinion expression based on the isolation fear among women. The regression equation was significant ($F = 7.611, p = .004$), with an $R^2$ of .057. Table 4 demonstrates that women’s opinion expression is significantly decreased when there is fear of isolation among the participants. Thus, it is acknowledged that isolation fear is a significant predictor of willingness to express an opinion on Facebook.

Fear of social isolation, the second important predictor in Noelle-Neumann's hypothesis, was found to be a negative predictor of opinion expression. Individuals who expressed a high degree of fear of social isolation were often much less inclined than those who expressed a low level of fear of isolation to voice their opinions on a contentious topic. It suggests that, similar to offline settings, there is a concern of social isolation on Facebook.

In order to determine whether or not participants with low, medium, and high degrees of fear of social isolation differed in their readiness to voice an opinion, a one-way ANOVA was used as a secondary test. $F(2, 116) = 4.081, p = .020$ indicated a significant difference. A significant difference was found between individuals who had a low level of fear of isolation ($M = 3.30, SD = 1.386$) and those who had a high level of fear of isolation ($M = 2.61, SD = 1.211$), according to a Tukey HSD post hoc test. There were no additional notable variations discovered. As anticipated, there were significant variations in the means between the groups with high and low fear of isolation ($t = 2.581, p = .012$).

Table: 5
Predicting Willingness to Express Opinion from Fear of Social Isolation (FSI) in Macro Climate of Opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig. (p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Social Isolation</td>
<td>.513</td>
<td>.220</td>
<td>33.061</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, the regression analysis was calculated to predict opinion expression on political hate speech in a micro-opinion climate based on the isolation fear among participants. The regression equation was not significant ($F = 6.845, p = .132$), with an $R^2$ of .055. Table 5 demonstrates that the participants’ tendency to express opinion on political hate speech is significantly decreased in a micro-opinion climate due to fear of isolation among the participants. Thus, it is verified that isolation fear is a significant predictor of one’s willingness to express a deceptive opinion about political hate speech on Facebook in a micro-opinion climate.

The hypothesis is consistent with Neuwirth (2000), Glynn and Park (1997), Moy et al. (2001), and Neuwirth et al. (2007) in that it is a negative predictor of opinion expression for females. There were notable disparities in the way groups with low and high levels of fear of social isolation expressed their opinions in the micro and macro circles conditions. When women speak in huge, impersonal groups on Facebook, these worries prevent them from being as vocal. In contrast, friends and close friends—also known as a micro circle—are made up of individuals who can maintain their distance from one another on social media in order to maintain their dignity or their friendship with the poster.

**Conclusion**

This study provided evidence in favour of the hypothesis that social media interactions on
networking sites like Facebook could possibly exhibit the Spiral of Silence. Although a substantial amount of research has indicated that in face-to-face communication settings, a stronger opinion expressed by the majority and the silencing of the (perceived) minority have an effect, the results of this study tend to suggest that female Facebook users may also experience a Spiral of Silence. Compared to those who felt less fearful and thought their opinions were in the majority, women who felt they belonged to an opinion minority and there seemed to be a lower correlation between open expression of views on Facebook and fear of rejection from one's social circle. It is also a depiction of cultural dichotomy of gender. Men express their political opinions openly while women do it merely in their close circles.

The nature of politics in general and liberal democracy in particular present another contextual challenge for women who want to participate in politics. Historically, men have benefited more from democracy than women. From ancient Greece to the twenty-first century, this political system has barred women from citizenship and been based on the public-private divide. Since the majority of political philosophers and thinkers, including Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, John Lock, Thomas Hobbes, and Hegel, believed that women belonged in the private sphere and were best suited for caring roles as mothers and wives, women have been kept out of the public sphere of politics. The public-private division continues to serve as the cornerstone of the many global democracies (Mende, 2023; Toepler et al, 2023).

References


