

Maggie Jiang
Lisa Cluett *Editors*

Spiral of Silence in the Social Media Era

A Global Perspective

 Springer

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Chapter 1

Introduction



Maggie Jiang and Lisa Cluett

1.1 Introduction to the Book

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory stands as a cornerstone in communication research, widely recognized for its profound insights into the formation and representation of public opinion within media environments (Apuke & Suntai, 2018; Scheufele, 2008). At its core, the theory elucidates how individuals tend to withhold expressing their views on contentious issues when they perceive them to be in the minority, thereby contributing to a "spiral" of silence where majority opinions dominate public discourse.

In the contemporary landscape, the advent of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter initially raised expectations that they might empower individuals with minority viewpoints, potentially diversifying and enriching public debate (Hampton et al., 2014). However, scholarly inquiry has since grappled with whether these platforms indeed foster open dialogue or inadvertently reinforce echo chambers that stifle dissenting voices.

Critically, the current "climate of opinion" facilitated by social media is pivotal in shaping users' willingness to engage in discussions about politically sensitive topics, an area that warrants deeper investigation (Brundidge, 2010; Chan, 2017; Chen, 2018; Gearheart & Zhang, 2015a, b). Social media's influence on public opinion dynamics extends beyond traditional media environments, posing new challenges and opportunities for understanding how individuals navigate their expression of opinions in digital spaces.

In essence, while Noelle-Neumann's theory continues to provide a framework for understanding the dynamics of public opinion formation, its application must evolve

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to encompass the complexities introduced by social media platforms in contemporary discourse. The ongoing discourse among scholars underscores the need for nuanced perspectives on the role of digital platforms in shaping the public sphere and influencing the expression of diverse viewpoints.

Despite extensive research, there remains a notable gap: a comprehensive understanding of how cultural backgrounds influence individuals' propensity to voice their opinions online. Existing studies have predominantly focused on Western contexts, overlooking the nuanced behaviors and decision-making processes shaped by diverse cultural norms worldwide.

This book aims to fill this critical void by offering a pioneering global perspective on the Spiral of Silence phenomenon in the age of social media. Drawing insights from eight distinct countries, contributors will provide up-to-date observations on the factors influencing the "climate of opinion" within their respective cultural contexts. By examining cross-cultural differences in user behaviors and attitudes, this volume promises to uncover invaluable insights into how individuals across the globe navigate the expression of their viewpoints on policy issues, both online and offline.

Notably, while Huiping Huang's seminal work in 2003 explored cultural influences on opinion expression in the United States and Taiwan, subsequent research in this vein has been sparse, especially on a broader international scale (Huang, 2005). Therefore, despite the "call for a return to a more macroscopic focus in spiral of silence research" by Moy and Scheufele (2000) more than two decades ago, existing research hasn't sufficiently addressed "cross-cultural differences" as key factors in predicting speaking out, which are crucial dependent variables in spiral of silence research. This book thus represents a pioneering effort to extend our understanding of how cultural diversity shapes public discourse, particularly in nations experiencing significant demographic shifts due to migration.

The implications of this research are profound, particularly in fostering social cohesion by amplifying the voices of migrants and culturally diverse populations in public discourse. In an increasingly interconnected world, understanding the dynamics of opinion formation across cultures is crucial for grasping the true spectrum of "public opinion." This book, therefore, not only addresses a pressing academic gap but also holds timely relevance in today's global geopolitical landscape.

Moreover, by shedding light on how social media and other digital platforms influence the expression of opinions, the research contributes to strategies that can enhance democratic participation and promote tolerance in multicultural societies. By identifying barriers to expression and exploring mechanisms that empower marginalized voices, this work strives to create a more equitable public discourse that reflects the richness of global perspectives.

Ultimately, this comprehensive examination not only enriches academic discourse but also offers practical tools for fostering a more informed and inclusive public dialogue worldwide. As societies navigate complex challenges and opportunities in the digital era, understanding and addressing the dynamics of opinion formation across diverse cultural contexts are essential for promoting social cohesion and democratic values on a global scale.

1.2 The Spiral of Silence Theory

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how public opinion is formed and expressed within societal contexts. At its core, the theory posits that individuals tend to remain silent or express their opinions less when they perceive their views to be in the minority, fearing social isolation or reprisal from the majority opinion holders. This phenomenon initiates a "spiral" effect wherein prevailing opinions gain momentum in public discourse, sidelining or suppressing minority viewpoints. In essence, the spiral of silence proposes a method to unify what some view as a fragmented notion of public opinion, providing an empirical framework for testing it (Salmon & Kline, 1985, p. 3).

As summarized by Moy and Scheufele (2000, p. 9), the assumptions of the spiral of silence theory can be delineated through five major hypotheses (Noelle-Neumann, 1983). These hypotheses encompass the fear of isolation, the threat of isolation, the quasi-statistical sense, the willingness to speak out, and the tendency toward silence. Factors crucial for comprehensively elucidating the spiral of silence process include the moral dimension of public opinion, temporal considerations, and the influence of media (Noelle-Neumann, 1983, p. 141, as cited in Moy and Scheufele 2000).

Expanding on this, understanding how these factors interact is essential for exploring how individuals perceive their social environment and decide whether to express their opinions. The moral component of public opinion refers to the ethical considerations that individuals weigh when deciding whether to conform to or diverge from prevailing views. Additionally, the passage of time can influence perceptions of public sentiment, with opinions potentially shifting over different periods. Moreover, the role of media in framing issues and shaping public discourse plays a critical role in amplifying certain viewpoints while marginalizing others, thereby influencing the dynamics of the spiral of silence.

Scholarly literature extensively examines and critiques the Spiral of Silence theory, emphasizing its relevance and limitations across various contexts.

The Mechanisms of the Spiral of Silence

At the core of the Spiral of Silence theory lies the concept of public perception and the fear of social isolation. Individuals tend to voice opinions perceived as widely accepted, fearing dissent could lead to social exclusion or ostracism. Consequently, minority viewpoints often remain unexpressed, reinforcing the dominance of majority opinions, regardless of reflecting true public sentiment diversity. Hampton et al. (2014) and Pariser (2011) studied social media algorithms and user behavior, revealing echo chambers where like-minded opinions prevail, further discouraging dissent and bolstering the spiral of silence.

Media Influence and Public Opinion

Originally, Noelle-Neumann formulated her theory concerning traditional mass media, highlighting their role in framing and presenting issues, shaping public perceptions, and influencing opinion climates. Mass media, through agenda-setting and framing, amplifies certain viewpoints while minimizing others. This reinforces the spiral of silence by encouraging conformity to dominant views and stifling dissent. Research by Scheufele (2008) and Glynn et al. (1999) delves into how media framing and agenda-setting mold dominant opinions and affect individuals' readiness to express dissenting views.

Critiques and Considerations

Critics like Gunther (1995) and Mutz (2006) raise concerns about oversimplification and the theory's limited applicability across diverse cultural and demographic contexts. They argue that individual psychological factors and situational contexts significantly influence opinion expression, suggesting that the theory's framework may overlook nuanced factors impacting public discourse.

In conclusion, while the Spiral of Silence theory offers valuable insights into opinion formation and expression dynamics, especially in media-rich environments, ongoing discourse and research are essential for refining its application across diverse societal settings. Understanding how media and cultural contexts shape public discourse is crucial for developing comprehensive models that reflect the complexities of contemporary communication landscapes.

1.3 Contextualizing the Social Media Era

In the realm of social media, scholars have noted that people acquire information about opinion climates not only from mass media but also from reference groups or social networks (Park et al., 1996; Hoffman, 2013; Mutz & Martin, 2001; Southwell & Yzer, 2007). With social media platforms significantly expanding individuals' interpersonal networks, the definition of "neighbors" extends beyond geographically and socially proximate groups to encompass a broader range of individuals with potentially fewer shared characteristics. In contemporary times, the advent of social media platforms has profoundly influenced the dynamics described by the Spiral of Silence theory. Initially hailed as tools to democratize public discourse, social media platforms have indeed expanded the avenues for individuals to participate in discussions on a global scale. These platforms facilitate instant communication and the rapid dissemination of information, enabling diverse voices to be heard beyond traditional media channels.

However, alongside these benefits, social media has introduced new challenges to public opinion formation. One significant concern is the phenomenon of echo chambers and filter bubbles, whereby algorithms and user behavior create environments where individuals are predominantly exposed to information and viewpoints that reinforce their existing beliefs. This selective exposure can lead to a polarization of opinions, as users become less likely to encounter dissenting perspectives that might challenge their own views.

Moreover, within these digital spaces, the fear of expressing minority viewpoints can be exacerbated. Users may hesitate to voice dissenting opinions if they perceive that their stance contradicts the prevailing sentiments within their online networks. The visibility of majority opinions, amplified through likes, shares, and trending topics, can further discourage individuals from speaking out, contributing to a digital manifestation of the spiral of silence.

Furthermore, the instantaneous and viral nature of social media can amplify the consequences of expressing unpopular opinions. Public backlash, online harassment, or social exclusion within digital communities are real concerns that individuals weigh when deciding whether to voice dissent. This heightened scrutiny can reinforce conformity to dominant viewpoints and deter the expression of diverse perspectives, thereby shaping the perceived consensus within digital public spheres.

Critically analyzing these dynamics in the context of the Spiral of Silence theory helps illuminate how digital communication technologies intersect with human behavior and societal norms. While social media platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for participation and engagement, understanding their impact on public discourse requires careful consideration of how they shape perceptions of majority and minority opinions, influence decision-making processes, and ultimately contribute to the formation of public opinion in the digital age.

1.4 Communication, Culture, and Technology

The intersection of communication, culture, and technology is a dynamic area of study that profoundly influences how individuals interact, form opinions, and engage in public discourse. In the digital age, advancements in technology, particularly the proliferation of social media platforms, have reshaped traditional communication dynamics and introduced new dimensions to cultural interactions.

Technology's Impact on Communication

Technological advancements have democratized access to information and expanded the reach of communication globally. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, provide instantaneous channels for individuals to share ideas,

opinions, and news. This unprecedented connectivity has facilitated virtual communities where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds can interact and exchange perspectives in real-time.

However, the accessibility and speed of digital communication also pose challenges. The rapid dissemination of information can lead to the spread of misinformation or polarizing content, which can amplify societal divisions rather than foster understanding. Moreover, the design of social media algorithms, which prioritize engaging content based on user preferences, contributes to the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles. These digital environments may limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, potentially reinforcing existing cultural biases and hindering constructive dialogue across cultural boundaries.

Culture's Influence on Communication Norms

Culture plays a significant role in shaping communication norms, influencing how individuals express opinions and perceive social interactions. Cultural values, beliefs, and linguistic nuances impact communication styles, influencing whether individuals prioritize consensus-seeking or assertiveness in expressing viewpoints. Understanding cultural differences in communication preferences is crucial for promoting effective cross-cultural dialogue and mitigating misunderstandings in global digital spaces.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory provides a lens through which to analyze how technology intersects with cultural and communication dynamics. In digital environments, individuals may conform to dominant opinions or refrain from expressing dissenting views due to the perceived visibility and consequences of their online interactions. Social media platforms, by amplifying popular sentiments and facilitating rapid feedback loops, can influence individuals' perceptions of consensus and their willingness to engage in public discourse.

Moreover, cultural contexts shape the application of the Spiral of Silence theory in digital spaces. Cultural norms regarding hierarchy, authority, and collective identity may influence how individuals navigate online discussions and perceive their roles within digital communities. Variations in communication styles and preferences across cultures further complicate the dynamics of opinion formation and expression in globalized digital environments.

1.5 Chapter Overview

Each chapter in the book will delve into specific national or regional contexts, offering detailed analyses of the dynamics shaping public opinion and expression within diverse cultural landscapes. Contributors will explore the role of social media platforms in amplifying or constraining the voices of minority opinions, shedding

light on whether digital environments truly foster inclusive dialogue or perpetuate silencing effects. Moreover, by comparing findings across different cultural settings, the volume aims to identify universal trends as well as unique factors influencing opinion dynamics, contributing to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the Spiral of Silence theory in a globalized world.

In sum, this collaborative effort not only aims to advance scholarly understanding of the Spiral of Silence across cultures but also to provide practical insights that can inform policymakers, media professionals, and the public on fostering more inclusive and representative public discourse in the digital age.

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Chapter 2

“In the Name of Cat Love”: Cyberbullying and Marginalization in Social Media Communities



Angela A. Beccanulli, Silvia Biraghi, and Rossella C. Gambetti

2.1 Introduction and Approach

Imagine a vibrant online community dedicated to the adorable Scottish Fold and Straight cats. Members eagerly share pictures, exchange tips, and celebrate their feline companions, creating an environment filled with warmth and shared affection. However, beneath this surface of fluffy cuteness, a darker reality lurks.

Every time a member expresses opinions differing from those of the majority, particularly from the group’s founders and administrators (considered de facto leaders in the group), they get abusively bombarded with insults, ostracized, and silenced.

This scenario exemplifies the insidious nature of social media communities (Kozinets, 2002). Groups launched to foster connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Cova, 1997), a sense of belonging, and validation (Taylor, 2020) that can morph into breeding grounds where the dynamics of the “Spiral of Silence theory”, as conceptualized by Noelle-Neumann (1974), get enacted (Chen, 2018; Connolly & Connolly, 2012; Sohn, 2022). This theory, originally exemplified for mass media, suggests that people tend to self-censor when they perceive their views differ from those of authoritative personalities or the majority, fearing isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This mechanism consequently reduces informative discussions and exchange by limiting the clash of diverse perspectives and leads to the solidification of a dominant narrative, not necessarily correct and valid, within a specific social group (i.e., country, social community).

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So far, research has demonstrated that the spiral of silence on social media communities is primarily driven by the frustration of those members not receiving interactions with their contents (Chen, 2018; Sohn, 2022), who to limit this negative emotional state, stop interacting with the group.

However, research has partially overlooked that often behind these mechanisms of selective-interaction, lies an act of cyberbullying (Connolly & Connolly, 2012), particularly its form of marginalization. Cyberbullying involves aggressive or passive-aggressive attacks by community members toward a victim (Dennehy et al., 2020), and marginalization is a specific form where victims are overpowered and then isolated from other members within the group (Gatzweiler & Baumüller, 2014). Consequently, the spiral of silence gets activated by the victim first to stop the abusive attacks and then to heal from the emotional suffering caused by exclusion.

Despite the escalating emergence of cyberbullying online and the consequent coercion of voices in techno-mediated groups, there is a paucity of studies exploring the mechanisms and effects of the activation of the spiral of silence in social media communities when caused by bullying, particularly marginalization.

This chapter delves into the nuanced and often troubling dynamics of social media interactions, where the potential for connection with like-minded individuals can transform into bullying, exclusion, silencing, and manipulation. Drawing on a specific case study of a Facebook community dedicated to Scottish Fold and Straight (SFS) cat enthusiasts, we explore through a netnographic research (Kozinets, 2020) how cyberbullying and marginalization are perpetuated within social media communities. We then highlight how these acts provoke the domino effects of the spiral of silence, specifically concluding by showing how the silencing diminishes the original intents of connections of social media and manipulates thoughts of those members who witnessed the cyberbullying act. In our conclusion, we also discuss how those silencing dynamics are strategically used to foster and perpetuate market dynamics based on exclusion.

Our exploration begins with a thorough review of existing literature on the spiral of silence in the context of social media. We then provide an overview of the intricacies of cyberbullying, its forms, and mechanisms, with a specific focus on marginalization and how they activate the spiral of silence. Finally, we delve into the netnographic analysis of the Facebook SFS community, revealing its transformation from a heaven for cat lovers into a site rife with marginalization, silencing, manipulation, and market exclusion.

With this chapter, we contribute to the understanding of how people interact in contemporary society, especially in the networked environment of social media where the sense of *communitas* seems to be lost in favor of supporting technocapitalist power dynamics. Additionally, we advance the literature on the spiral of silence by demonstrating how it is perpetuated through acts of cyberbullying and how one of its effects can be the induction of specific thoughts and potentially consumption behaviors.

2.2 Theoretical Background

The Spiral of Silence Theory in Social Media

Aristotele, long ago, and later Adam Smith recognized humans are inherently social animals, driven by a profound need for connection, validation, and belonging. This intrinsic desire constantly motivates us to seek out opportunities for socialization and sharing, and in recent years, social media platforms have emerged as a primary hub for fulfilling these needs (Swaminathan et al., 2020).

These platforms transcend geographical boundaries, allowing us to stay connected with our loved ones and at the same time fostering a powerful sense of *communitas* by drawing us closer to like-minded individuals who share our same passions and interests (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) providing a sense of validation and belonging (Taylor, 2020).

However, a growing body of research (Chen, 2018; Connolly & Connolly, 2012; Sohn, 2022) suggests that social media, despite its intended purpose of fostering connection, validation, and belonging, can also exacerbate the silencing of users in sharing opinions. Specifically, these studies highlight the potential of these techno-mediated platforms to fuel the “spiral of silence” dynamics, coercing people to self-censor, leave the platform and thus hindering meaningful connections. Developed by Noelle-Neumann in 1974, the spiral of silence theory posits that individuals are less likely to express opinions that deviate from dominant views portrayed in the media, fearing ostracization by their social group. Consequently, they silence their dissenting opinions, conforming instead to the majority view. As more people conform to a single opinion, dissenting voices become increasingly marginalized, solidifying the dominant narrative as the recognized norm (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Sohn (2022) and Chen (2018) stated that social media’s unique affordances are the triggers to enhance the dynamics of the spiral of silence in these techno-mediated contexts. Particularly, the capacity to reach diverse audiences with a single post and the ease of engagement through likes, dislikes, and comments transform the sharing of private opinions into public statements, subject to immediate scrutiny and judgment. Then, when private opinions align with the majority view or with the view of authoritative people (i.e., influencers, founders and administrators of online communities), they receive positive interactions and potentially go viral, becoming introjected into the dominant view (Kim, 2018). Conversely, when private opinions are perceived as dissenting, they get ignored, receiving no likes, comments, or shares. This avoidance discourages the poster from sharing other contents fearing of been judged naive in continuously posting contents, which don’t find consent. Hence, they progressively silence themselves (Sohn, 2022).

However, it is important to note that behind the reduced interaction of social media members with certain content often lies a cyberbullying attack (Dennehy et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2008). Cyberbullying exploits the affordances of techno-mediated platforms to first perpetrate insults and public shaming (Chan et al., 2021), and then marginalize the content and so the individuals. The social and emotional impacts of

cyberbullying can often be so detrimental to activate the spiral of silence phenomenon in social media (Connolly & Connolly, 2012). Victims cease defending themselves, sharing content or participating in discussions for fear of further harassment and also to stop the relative emotional distress. Moreover, other members witnessing the abuse also self-censor, refraining from expressing support concerning similar repercussions (Chan et al., 2021).

In the next paragraph, we will delve deeper into the dynamics of cyberbullying and how they enact the spiral of silence in social media.

Cyberbullying

The rise of social media has profoundly transformed how we connect and share ideas. These platforms have emerged as the primary forum for individuals to engage with a broader community and express their private views. However, this newfound accessibility presents a double-edged sword.

On one hand, social media offers the potential to elevate a private opinion to the status of recognized norm on a specific issue. This typically occurs when a private opinion goes “viral”, meaning it spreads rapidly and extensively among social media users (Oxford Dictionary), receiving positive reinforcement through likes, positive comments, and widespread reproduction. Virality is often achieved when the shared opinion is “perceived to have social value” (Jenkins et al., 2013) and when it “aligns with the personal beliefs and values” (Hermida, 2016) of those who receive it. Perceived social value implies that the opinion consolidates diverse ideas and practices, allowing users, who come across it, to use it to express their identities (Jenkins et al., 2013). Meanwhile, alignment with personal beliefs and values indicate that the opinion is perceived personally meaningful by the social media users receiving it, as it resonates with their worldview, and reinforces their existing opinions and attitudes (Hermida, 2016). When an opinion becomes viral, the poster experiences a surge in self-confidence, fueling a powerful urge to replicate that success. This motivates them to become more proactive content creators, driven by a desire to maintain or even amplify their newfound “thought leader” status on social media.

Conversely, the same affordances that facilitate virality can also create a breeding ground for negativity. This typically happens when a private opinion is viewed as different from the majority view or from the leaders’ viewpoint on the platform. Such a divergence can rapidly led to cyberbullying, which manifests as a deliberate form of aggression through dislike, derogatory and marginalizing posts, comments and messages, orchestrated by a group of individuals over time (Dennehy et al., 2020). Specifically, a cyberbullying incident is initiated by a single aggressor, who progressively incites others to mimic and perpetuate their behavior (Henares-Montiel et al., 2022), transforming it into a group act.

Cyberbullying can manifest in various forms (Kang et al., 2023; Trolley et al., 2006):

- *Flaming*: sending of angry, rude, vulgar messages about a person to an online social group or to that person via chat or in a public comment under a post;
- *Online Harassment*: repeatedly sending offensive messages via chat to a person;
- *Cyberstalking*: online harassment that includes threats of harm or is excessively intimidating;
- *Denigration*: Sending harmful, untrue, or cruel statement about a person or his/her opinions to other people via group chat or posting such materials online as an independent post or comment to this person’s own publications;
- *Masquerade*: Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material that makes the person look bad;
- *Outing*: Sending or posting material about a person that contains sensitive, private, or embarrassing information, including forwarding private messages or images
- *Marginalization*: cruelly prevailing over an outsider opinion to the extent of excluding them from an online group

These forms can be actualized as isolated acts or can intertwine with each other. However, in both cases, an act of cyberbullying follows a specific process with identifiable phases, akin to a tightening vortex, progressively constricting the victim’s dignity until their complete oblivion from the platform (Kang et al., 2023) (see Fig. 2.1).

The process begins with a *trigger event*. This initial phase is sparked by an incident, which typically is a minor disagreement between two users but can also be the dissemination of fake news by a specific individual.

This event prompts a single user to initiate a form of cyberbullying against the poster of the controversial opinion or misinformation, who from that moment becomes “the victim”. As the trigger event garners attention, other social media users begin to mimic and amplify the bullying behavior. This imitation creates a sense of

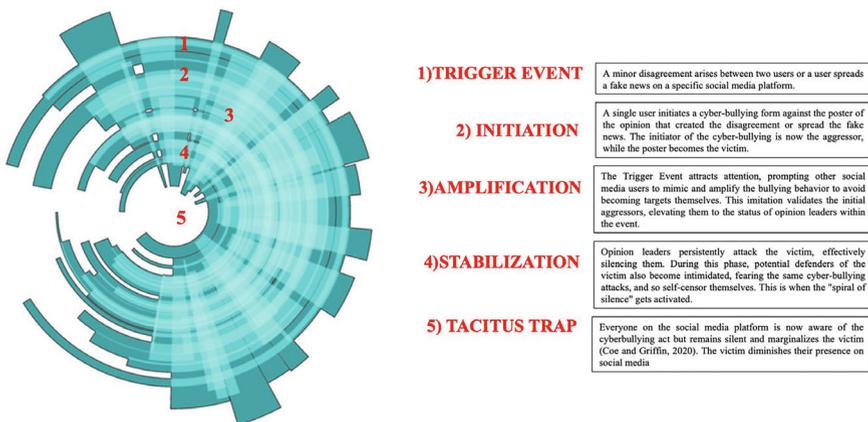


Fig. 2.1 The cyberbullying process (Source Authors’ elaboration from Kang and colleagues [2023])

social validation for the initial aggressors, elevating them to the status of opinion leaders within the event.

These leaders then exploit common psychological factors, primarily fear, to maintain their newly acquired roles. They persistently attack the victim with angry comments and insults, aiming to discourage any form of social engagement or discussion (Kang et al., 2023). Fearing that the harassment will not stop, the victim begins to silence themselves, avoiding any answer to these negative comments. During this phase, also potential defenders become intimidated, and thus refrain from intervening. This is the stage where cyberbullying becomes stabilized, enacting and capitalizing on the “spiral of silence” effect (Byrne, 2021), further intensifying and solidifying the harassment.

In the final phase, known as the “Tacitus Trap”, everyone in the platform is aware of the cyberbullying but remains silent. In this last stage, it is typically enacted the *marginalization* of the victim (Coe & Griffin, 2020). The victim’s posts receive no likes, comments, or shares, and they begin losing followers. This last attack further silences the victim, demotivating them from engaging with the platform altogether. Often, this culminates in self-imposed exile, where the victim abandons the platform, deleting their account entirely.

In the next paragraph, we will specify the dynamics of marginalization in social media communities.

Marginalization in Social Media Communities

Cyberbullying on social media is a profound scar on our contemporary society, but one of its most insidious forms is the marginalization of the victim’s voice. Marginalization encompasses the *prevarication* and consequent *exclusion* of individuals or groups from essential opportunities, impeding their full and equal participation in society or specific communities (Gatzweiler & Baumüller, 2014). This exclusion often hinges on demographic identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and sexual identity, but can also arise from circumstances like chronic illness, physical ability, profession (Coe & Griffin, 2020), and even dissenting opinions.

On social media, marginalization is typically the final form enacted in a cyberbullying attack, though it can also occur in the initiation and amplification phases.

It is a phenomenon prevalent in *social media communities*, where individuals theoretically assemble based on shared interests, cultural cohesion, empathy, a common desire to form a group, mutual understanding, and the willingness to exchange advices and information (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Cova, 1997; Kozinets, 1997, 1999, p. 254, 2001). Recent research in consumer collectives (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Thomas et al., 2013; Weinberger, 2015; Zwick & Bradshaw, 2016) showed how instead these forms of aggregation are far from being peaceful *communitas* where people stay together, motivated by ideals of caring and sharing (Kozinets, 2002), linked by tight social bonds (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn,

2001) and inspired by communal meaning-making and long-term orientation (Cova, 1997). Particularly, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016, p. 727) highlighted that especially the relational environment created by the social media is less conducive to the formation of the kinds of enduring social bonds that are understood as the foundation for communities. Instead, more fleeting forms of association together with a publicity-oriented attitude (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Rainie & Wellman, 2012) and non-communitarian ethos of consumer sociality (Kozinets, 2010) prevail.

Indeed, very often, founders and administrators in social media communities enact abusive behaviors that prevaricate others’ opinions and beliefs to maintain their authoritative positions in the group. They employ discursive strategies to ensure their content dominates the conversations and hide those of whom disagree. These strategies include:

- *Selective sharing*: leaders/specific members in a community interact only with specific members’ content (Bigman et al., 2019), typically those that ally with their opinions. This creates a strong nucleus of like-minded individuals within the community, who support each other in giving visibility to their opinion.
- *Sockpuppeting*: leaders/specific members in a community use multiple “fake” accounts to impersonate different people, all sharing the same opinion and interacting with each-other’s content (Greyson & Costello, 2023; Liu et al., 2016). This tactic reinforces the appearance of consensus, guided by these leaders/specific members
- *Trolling and provocation*: leaders/specific members in a community post inflammatory, irrelevant, or off-topic messages to provoke emotional responses in the users dissenting from their opinions or to disrupt discussions where the “victims” tried to introduce and present their ideas (Demsar et al., 2021; Mkono, 2018).
- *Social comparison*: leaders/specific members in a community post ideal images of their experiences or of themselves to convey personal enhanced views of their identity (i.e., success, self-power, popularity, sociability) (Kim & Lee, 2011; Vitak & Ellison, 2013). Such content receives disproportionately positive interactions leading to feelings of inadequacy and frustration among other users (Vogel et al., 2014), who then may refrain from expressing their experiences or views of themselves for fear of not measuring up.

These discursive strategies technically exploit social media algorithms, which increase the visibility of opinions receiving many interactions while limiting the reach of dissenting views that receive no engagement (Louis & Mohamed, 2024). According to a Pew Research Report in 2021, the lack of engagement with created and shared social media posts can lead to various emotional effects, particularly frustration, but also anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. These specific emotions compel the victim to permanently silence themselves in the community. They will gradually lose enthusiasm for creating content and engaging with other posts, eventually leading to their exit from the social media community.

The chilling effect of this silencing is profound. It progressively limits the share of diverse viewpoints in the social media community, killing debate, exchange of information, and acculturation. This will prompt the opinions of the founders and

administrators to dominate and users who have witnessed the marginalization to adopt a contrived persona who conform to it to avoid any possible backlash and gain full acceptance (DeWall et al., 2009; Mead et al., 2011).

In this chapter, we present a specific case study of a Facebook community dedicated to Scottish Fold & Scottish Straight cats. This group was originally formed by enthusiasts passionate about the breed, aiming to share and spread correct information, knowledge, and phatic forms of affection (i.e. picture sharing) about these cats. However, instead, this social media community turns out to be a site where bullying, exclusion, silencing, and also manipulation happen. Therefore, through this case study, we highlight how dynamics of the spiral of silence enacted by cyberbullying and marginalization unfold on a social media community, and how they contribute to the manipulation of consumer thoughts and behaviors.

Before delving into the case study, we briefly overview in the next paragraphs how beliefs and opinions on pet ownership and pet care can be different in our current society and so how ideological divergences can emerge and how they can trigger people to express anger and hate to the point of generating bullying acts.

The Bright Side of Pet Ownership

Starting from the seminal work of Hirschman (1994), human-animal and pet ownership literature has explored the relationship people develop with their companion animals from different angles. Pets have been treated both as consumption objects, something that we own (Hirschman, 1994) and we eventually include in our self-concept (Belk, 1988), and as semi-human equals with whom we establish an inter-subjective connection and we share our life (Sanders, 2003) as friends and members of our family (Hirschman, 1994; Holbrook & Woodside, 2008; Sanders, 1990).

Pets as objects in the consumer's environment have been regarded as an extension of their owner (Belk, 1996; Hirschman, 1994). Their role has been connected to functional and experiential benefits (Holbrook, 1996; Holbrook et al., 2001) that can be gained by the consumer-owner. Pets that are used as guide, rescue and therapy animals are associated with a functional role, although the vast majority of pets are linked to an experiential value. In this case pets are seen as ornaments and status symbols (Hirschman, 1994) (for example Chiawawas for celebrities). Their aesthetic value is especially recognized when pets are kept for avocation purposes (Hirschman, 1994) to be shown in those exhibitions that appreciate the compliance to beauty and body proportion standards. Besides owners who consume pets to exhibit them, breeding has also demonstrated the tendency of owners to develop patterns of preferences that lead consumers who had been socialized to care for a certain breed to select the same breed as their ideal pet throughout their life (Hirschman, 1994).

Clearly pets are more than objects, they are often treated as persons in their own right (Sanders, 1990) and imbued by their owners with human qualities (Hirschman, 1994). *Pets as semi-human equals* act as companions of their human owners (Hirschman, 1994), who assign them different roles in their life. Pets can

be used as transitional others like surrogate parents for children or surrogate children for prospective parents or childless couples (Belk, 1988; Hirschman, 1994). They can be considered friends and be welcomed as members of our family (Belk, 1988; Downey & Ellis, 2008; Greenebaum, 2004; Hirschman, 1994; Holbrook & Woodside, 2008; Sanders, 1990), by getting admitted to the most intimate spaces of our households and to family rituals (for example bedrooms; celebrations of pets' birthday at the dining table, recently also with special delicatessen or pet patisserie; pet lifestyle education on trendy topics including sessions with pet behaviorists or pet vegetarian/vegan lifestyle training; pet weddings; and disposition of companion animals in funeral rites) (Holak, 2008). They are so part of the family ensemble that owners will eventually grieve in sorrow their death (Stephens & Hill, 1996). Our pets are then sacred (Belk et al., 1989) significant others (Bettany & Daly, 2008; Haraway, 2003), cherished and treated with unusual kindness or consideration. As equals they are respected for their true nature and valued for who they innately are (Beverland et al., 2008).

These two perspectives (pets as objects and pets as equals), point at the inherent ambivalence of human-pet relationship (Bettany & Daly, 2008), where possession, civilization, and control are confronted or combined with the pleasure and acceptance of wilderness and nature (Belk, 1996). As Hirschman (1994) puts it pets represent a “mediating category between humans and animals, having aspects of both but being fully neither one or the other”. Having a liminal position (Cheetham & McEachern, 2013) pets transcend somehow the boundaries in the animal-human distinction (Holbrook & Woodside, 2008). The relationship between pets as companion species and their human partners iteratively entails the co-constitution, the enactment and also the transgression of sacred cultural binaries such as subject/object, human/non-human, civilized/animalistic and chaotic, nature/culture (Belk, 1996; Bettany & Daly, 2008; Brownlie, 2008). The continuous mediation and re-mediation of these dualisms are the constitutive essence of human-pet relations. That allows pet owners to get a civilized taste of the fascinating beauty of nature and the fierceness of animality and wilderness.

Although based on ambivalence and cultural binaries, the relation humans have with pets is usually considered a source of pleasure, entertainment, and deeply felt love (Belk, 1996; Holbrook, 1996; Holbrook et al., 2001; Sanders, 2003). Love is indeed the common ingredient that qualifies the experience people share with pets (Holbrook, 2008). Apparently it seems that pets are making us better persons in our daily life: they help us understanding ourselves by building our sense of self and present it to others (Aylesworth et al., 1999; Holbrook et al., 2001; Mosteller, 2008); they make us minded, empathetic, reciprocating, and well-aware of the basic rules and roles that govern the relationship (Sanders, 1993) not only at inter-species level but also in the relationship with other people (Bettany & Daly, 2008; Dotson & Hyatt, 2008; Holbrook et al., 2001; Smith, 2015). Pets support us in developing our sociability and well-being (Cavanaugh et al., 2008; Hirschman, 1994; Wood et al., 2007). However, there are also consumer behaviors that do not fall into the bright side of human-pet relationships.

The Dark Side of Pet Ownership

So far literature has dealt with the drawbacks of pet breeding and the moral concerns that arise from cross-breeding procedures (Beverland et al., 2008) to make pets look more pleasant and attractive by imposing human standards of beauty. In this perspective pets are seen as toys and branded objects (Belk, 1996; Holbrook et al., 2001) over which breeders and owners exert their mastery to raise pets that are cute, clean, calm and are therefore praised and rewarded for their anthromorphization and compliance to accepted behaviors (Beverland et al., 2008; Hirschman, 1994). Pet breeding has also been explored in relation to the economic cost connected to breed selection just for the sake of profit and to the acquisition of special cross-breeding results, also as a way to show off conspicuous consumption related to the appreciation of pure and rare breeds, which in terms of morality calls again for concerns regarding consumers' behavior related to throwaway pets when they are not fashionable anymore (Beverland et al., 2008; Cote, 2008).

In all these cases owners are motivated by extrinsic goals to get a pet (Beverland et al., 2008): they do not value pets for who they innately are; rather they treat them as a means to an end (Ahuvia, 2008). In this kind of relationship, the owner does not truly accept and love the authentic self of the pet (Ahuvia, 2008), instead he/she loves specific features of the pet (such as cuteness, portability, quietness, cleanness) or he/she cares for the self-relevant and social-exchange benefits that the pet brings to him/her (Beverland et al., 2008).

Although literature has identified a number of aspects of the dark side of pet consumption such as immoral crossbreed selection and treatment, economic exploitation of pet, consumption of pets for status and extrinsic motivations (Beverland et al., 2008) and extreme breeding and grooming to conform with ideal mental pictures of pets and enhance distinction in competition (Bettany & Daly, 2008; Cheetham & McEachern, 2013), degradation of nature and animal innate habits (Brownlie, 2008; Darden & Worden, 1996), all these aspects are focused on consumption practices that are intrinsically part of what people do when they look after or manage a pet. Both studies that focused on the positives of human-pet relations and on their negatives adopt a micro-focus that specifically addresses the interactions of individuals with a pet, a breed, and the relevant others included in this relationship (such as family, friends, breeders, competitors at exhibitions). These others are part of the personal and closer relationship circle of the individuals that have been studied. Contributions are missing that set the study of human-pet relationships in a broader relational and consumption context (Cote, 2008), where pets can serve as mediators of interactions with distant others.

2.3 Case Study: Cyberbullying and Marginalization in a Social Media Community Dedicated to Scottish Folds and Straights

Context and Method

Nowadays the massive use of technological devices has opened new avenues for pet-related consumption: pets have become craved for consumption objects in the social media as well as powerful actors in enabling conversations in the digital landscape to the extent that different social media communities have raised to share the beauty and cuteness of these animals or to share knowledge, opinions, and information on how to treat and educate them.

Specifically, in this context, a Facebook social media community has been activated in 2012 dedicated to Scottish Folds and Straights. This group aggregates freely and openly all breed lovers to share their cat passions, stories, information, and knowledge and has become one of the leading social spaces to discuss and learn about this breed.

The opening of this community is motivated by the fact that Scottish Folds and Straights along with their longhair variants Highland Folds and Straights are one of the most sought-after cat breeds in the world feline scenario, thanks to their extremely cute appearance given by the typical folded ears and general body roundness, as well as to their sweet and balanced temperament (Fig. 2.2). They represent one of the most appreciated breeds of indoor cats that are considered particularly suitable for working people living in city apartments. That since they are calm, affectionate, and independent cats. Moreover, they are quite robust and easy to take care of, and they are extremely sociable. For these reasons, breeders of these cats have increased in number in recent years and city pet shops have started an intensive selling of this breed.

In this scenario, the Facebook community has been launched with the specific aim to share as much knowledge as possible on nutrition, pathologies, and curiosities on this highly requested breed, creating an online place where people are also welcomed to share personal daily experiences with these wonderful cats. This social space is explicitly not devoted to selling cats but only to sharing pictures, stories, and experiences. This is a space that publicly declares to be an open place to any lover of the breed no matter whether they are owners, breeders or just passionate, free from any commercial ethos.

However, conversely to their purpose, this is a space where personal daily experiences, and buying and selling behaviors lead to the most bestial harassments.

For all these reasons, we decided to analyze this social media community to explore how a place born to share information and knowledge about beautiful cats, symbols of positive emotions, life facilitation, and joyful thinking turns them instead into cultural artifacts for cyberbullying, particularly marginalization, and silencing of specific individuals (i.e., owners, breeders or just passionate). We analyze this case



Fig. 2.2 Lovable Scottish fold cat (*Source* iStock free image)

also as the perfect ground to highlight how marginalization and silencing dynamics unfold on social media and how specifically they serve for the tacit potential construction of a position of market dominance based on the exclusion of diverse opinions that do not comply with the dominant one.

Specifically, for our analysis we conducted a netnographic research (Kozinets, 2020). Netnography refers to a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical and representational research practices in which a significant amount of the data collected, and observational research conducted, originates in and gets manifested through the data shared freely on the Internet. We adopted a netnography because it is the most suitable method to analyze carefully the interaction dynamics that are hosted and animated by social media sites, such as this Facebook community.

Our netnography was based on ten-year long participant observation of the SFS Facebook group, which started in May 2014 and is still ongoing. The participant observation began when a member of the research team that was madly in love with this cat breed decided to welcome a Scottish Fold kitten into her family. While the other research team members remained untouched by the “Scottish Fold love effect” to guarantee a laic outlook on the research object, we consider having in the research team a genuine breed lover and owner as an interesting opportunity to better grasp the various angles of our investigated phenomenon. The ten-year-participation in the Facebook group generated a rich and varied data set made of more than two hundred pages of pictures, images, videos, hyperlinks to other visual sites and materials, conversations, collages, and emoticons that group members actively posted to share their cat-related passions and personal experiences. Besides active participant observation, field notes were taken systematically and insights from fieldwork were discussed inside the research team on an ongoing basis. Data was coded for emergent themes following traditional paper and pencil technique. After iterative discussions within the research team, themes relevant to the understanding of people interaction

dynamics mediated by SFS social media discourse and cultural artifacts were identified. Those themes were subsequently organized into similar and intertwined categories that allowed the researchers to depict different trajectories of human-pet and human-human interactions uncovering cyberbullying and manipulation intentions and behaviors.

For the incarnation phase, to ensure the privacy of members in the Facebook community, we chose to anonymize their identities and cloak their respective comments and posts using ChatGPT and Gemini AI, while preserving their complete meanings and context.

Results of the Case Study

Shadows of Pet Love: Cats as Humans to Love vs Objects to Prevail

Our analysis clearly shows that the SFS Facebook group is explicitly organized and animated around the positive principles of pleasure and deeply felt love (Belk, 1996; Holbrook, 2008), where Scottish/Highland cats are magically capable of triggering that kind of unconditional love, apparently uncorrupted and incorruptible that characterizes human-pet relationships (Bettany & Daly, 2008; Brockman et al., 2008). Cats are embraced as family members and are proudly treated as having equal civilizes status as compared to their human parents (Hirschman, 1994; Belk, 1996). Many are the posts in the group, where owners portray their cats referring to them in the copy as “my daughter and son”.

However, in many other posts of the community, emerges also very clearly a dyadic nature of the relational trajectory that intertwines the group members (mainly the founder and administrators of the page) with a closed micro-group of estimating, supporting peers. It is only within this closed micro-group of dyadic bonds that positive acting and apparently genuine, uncorrupted cat love finds its full expression. This supporting behaviors within a small system of people is particularly evident in a conversation generated on the group after the announcement of a Scottish Fold’s birthday:

Luisa: “A big Happy Birthday to my beloved Luna!!! How lovely you are!”

Chiara replies with ♥

Anne: “Oh cutie! Happy Birthday!”

Chiara replies with ♥

Matteo: “Feliz Cumpleano!! You are very lucky to have the best family possible especially the purest and most lovely mama”

John replies with 🐱

Therefore, inside the small “magic circle” dyadic cat love emerges as the perfect expression of caring philosophy, where positive intentions are animated by generosity and affection and where a sincere aid spirit is aimed at patiently looking after innocent feline creatures. Generosity, affection, and aid spirit inside the “magic circle” thrives

also through the sharing of cat photos. Members of the magic circle often actively encourage other users of the community to post pictures of their kittens, sparking a flurry of adorable felines.

Interestingly, the majority of these photos are shared by members of the magic circle, and the cats featured are declared to be purchased from select few catteries, all known and recognized by the magic circle. These posts receive high levels of interaction and positive, affectionate comments, creating a shared connection among the members. This practice strengthens their sense of micro-community and reinforced their existing bonds.

Anne's post: Share photos of your kittens in the comments.

Mark: Here's my Fanny!

Fufi Cattery: Oh no, poor thing, all shaved.

Mark: Yes, it's too hot! 🤔

Anne: She's beautiful, and she looks like a queen in that pose!

Mark: Thank you, thank you!

Joanna: Here are mine, Duchess and Camillo.

Olivia: They are wonderful!

Chiara: Here's my Fiona, wishing a happy Valentine's Day to her cousins Duchess and Camillo.

Giulia: Amidst their fights, my two cats from Fufi Cattery are resting!

Alexandra: Fiona looks so much like Duchess!

Chiara: Yes, they're from the same cattery.

Alexandra: Beautiful! 😊 These interactions exemplify how members of the magic circle strongly support each other within the community, engaging positively with each other's posts and sharing affection for each other's cats. However, there is a hidden aspect to this shared support and love.

In the community, Scottish/Highland Fold and Straight cats serve as a classification tool (Holt, 1995). They function as a gateway for owners to assert their social status within the community and the currency to gain acceptance inside the micro-group (Bettany & Daly, 2008; Cheethman & McEachern, 2013). In other words, within this context, "consuming cats" becomes an act to classify their consumers (Holt, 1995). Group members flood the Facebook community with posts mentioning and showing cats' prizes, awards, and ranking positions (see Fig. 2.3) perfectly incarnating the marginalization form of "social comparison" (Kim & Lee, 2011; Vitak & Ellison, 2013). These posts are typically accompanied by copies such as: "*Results for Top Cat 2018: Lukor Fold Xochipilli, recognized as the top Scottish Fold globally, best Junior and best Adult in Italy; Farah from Giardino delle Favole Cattery achieved third place in the overall world ranking. Best Kitten in Italy.*" These postings function to create a distinction and so a classification among owners, distinguishing between good owners with a blazoned cat that so deserve to be included in the micro-group and those who don't.

Once group members are classified, they are assigned to a "caste" that, similarly to the Hindu social system, is closed and immutable and affects everything a member posts, no matter if reflections, news, or just cat pictures. In this regard, "first class"

Fig. 2.3 Facebook post showing a Scottish Fold cat photographed wearing a medal, won as the world most beautiful Scottish fold (Source Facebook post cloaked with ChatGPT)



members always get more likes to what they post, or they receive more comments and a more active participations to their discussion. While “second class” members, even when their cats are undoubtedly cute and adorable, grab less attention and get almost no likes from the rest of the group getting marginalized (see Fig. 2.4 in which cats are equally adorable but users do not enjoy the same status and recognition in the community). At this point, we’ve noticed that typically “second class” members attempt to share other two or three posts, but then they cease and also stop posing questions about breed specifics, thereby silencing themselves.

Therefore, it clearly emerges that the intrinsic classification of individuals perpetrated inside the group ends up in a prevarication behavior toward the “insignificant others” mainly performed through “social comparison” marginalization strategy. The insignificant others consequently get silenced, becoming unknown members of the groups. These behaviors collide with the good ethical values and the deep meanings inspired by the desire for connectivity, information and acculturation that are at the basis of the declared Facebook fan page intentions.

“What’s the Name of Your Cat?”—The Trigger Event that Fuels Marginalization and Manipulation

Beside the showing-off of the cats’ blazons, another tactic used to classify individuals as “first class” or “second class” members leverages the cat’s origin.

As soon as a new member is accepted into the group and joyfully posts the first picture of his/her cat mentioning its name, the virgin enthusiasm of being part of

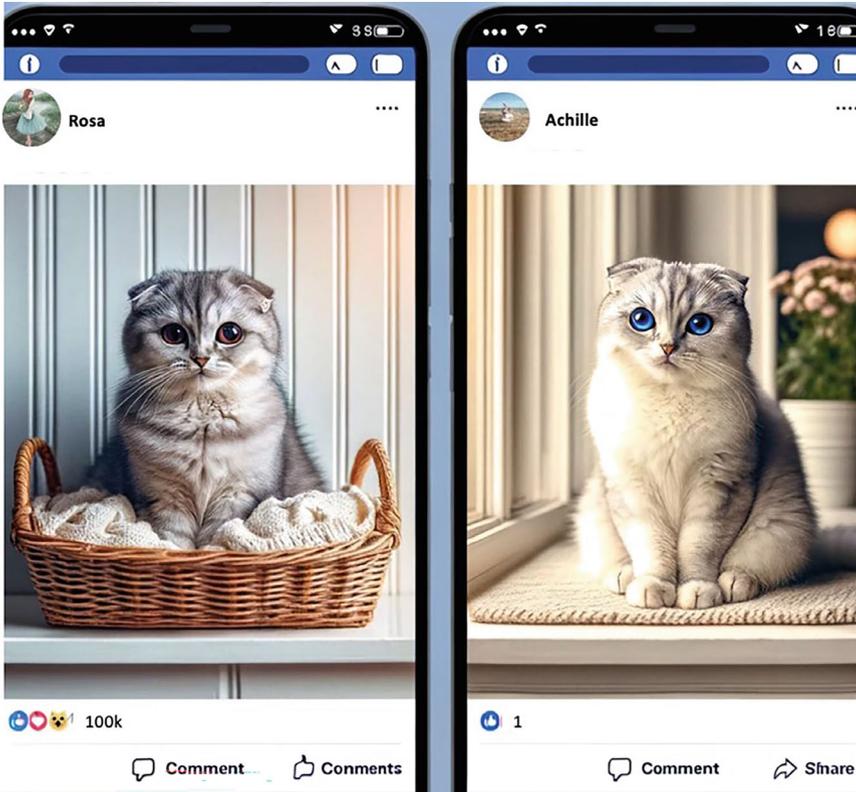


Fig. 2.4 A confrontation of two posts: The left one from a “first class” breeder, the right one from a “second class” owner (Source Facebook post cloaked with ChatGPT)

the group is immediately smashed by the typical inquisitive first question by the administrator: *“Hello. What’s the name of your cat?”*.

At this point what normally happens is that the new member gets a little bit confused, because they are sure of having just posted the name of the cat, then they realize that by “name of the cat” the administrator means the name of the cattery where the cat has been purchased.

Here the genuine family bond traditionally linking the pet with their humans (Bettany & Daly, 2008; Greenebaum, 2004; Haraway, 2003; Sanders, 2003) is violated by the heavy intrusion of the market, where the business dimension is even (ironically) humanized by the administrator’s request for indicating the name of the cattery as if it were the last name of the cat in place of the commonly expected last name of the owner.

Sadly, many members at this point, either feel terribly guilty and “confess” that their cat does not come from a certified breeder or, pushed by pride blended with common sense, simply reply: *“Sorry but...the name of my cat is Lila, as I have already*

wrote, do you maybe mean my last name? In this case, my cat is Lila Rossi...I did not purchase my cat from a regular cattery...or is it necessary to have a pedigree to love your cat?”.

Unfortunately, similar answers to this abusive question work as a trigger event to start an act of cyberbullying, often leading to the self-exile of the newly entered member from the community.

Similar episodes unfold when a group member seeks help or advice from others regarding a serious health issue with their cat. This scenario occurs quite frequently, as the group’s ethos is openly declared to share information and support concerning the breed. However, in these instances, the administrators and members of the “magic circle”, rather than responding with empathy, solidarity, and practical suggestions for the cat’s care, pose the intrusive question about the cattery where the cat was purchased. At that point, if the owner reveals that the cat was bought from a cattery not recognized by the magic circle or if he/she does not disclose the name as they know it is not accepted by the micro-group, they face severe and harsh bullying directed at their person and identity. These attacks resort to private insults, completely overshadowing the cat’s health issues and the information about the cattery, which was initially the focus of the conversation.

Franz’s post (first class member): **ATTENTION ALL MEMBERS!** Periodically, as a breeder and group administrator, I find myself having to explain the importance of choosing a serious breeder who prioritizes a breeding project aimed at improving the breed. Despite efforts to provide correct information about the breed, more and more people fall victim to pseudo-breeders who are nothing more than untrained individuals lacking any basic knowledge to undertake a serious breeding project, often devoid of any form of ethics. The ones who suffer the most, besides the unfortunate families, are the CATS, who pay directly and painfully for these people’s incompetence. From my experience, the main reasons families make the wrong choice are haste and the desire to save money. (...) A wrong breed selection by incompetent people can cause irreparable damage. The person who bought this kitten you see in the photo thinks they got a good deal, but even an inexperienced person can tell from the photos that they bought nothing but suffering. From now on, I urge you to choose a puppy or kitten of any breed with caution, avoiding the pitfalls of “saving money” or “dictating the timeline.”

- Josy (Second class member):* I have 4 cats. Only one has a pedigree, but she has fallen ill multiple times and has been on an immunosuppressive drug since she was four years old, after numerous incorrect treatments and trials, costing a modest 140 euros a month. For life.
- Franz (First class member):* @Josy, where did you get it? Surely from people who don't even know where to start with breeding and sell poorly selected kittens with completely devastated immune systems.
- Josy (Second class member):* No, I got it from a very well-known cattery.
- Franz (First class member):* Well-known to whom? Maybe it's well-known to me for negative reasons.
- Josy (Second class member):* Well, then you can't be sure of anything with that logic...

Immediately after the non-disclosure of the name of the cattery, the "first class" member imagines that it was one not recognized by the micro-group and so initiates the attack, typically with a passive-aggressive rhetoric of denigration.

- Franz (First class member):* Without knowing who we're talking about and without knowing what evaluations you made when choosing the right cattery, I can't give you an answer.
- Josy (Second class member):* Then maybe you shouldn't make such statements since you don't know which cattery it is. Unfortunately, animals can get sick with or without a pedigree, just like humans. There are also crooks who take advantage, but illness spares no lineage.
- Franz (First class member):* There are diseases that obviously can't be predicted or avoided, like cancer. Then there are diseases that can be excluded by testing the breeders and removing positive subjects from breeding. There are also diseases that can be reduced significantly through selective breeding. Who ever said pedigree cats can't get sick? Certainly not me. So don't put words in my mouth.
- Josy (Second class member):* You didn't understand the reason behind my first comment and made judgments full of prejudices without even having the essential data to judge.
- Franz (First class member):* My comment was general. I find your first comment completely irrelevant to the original post. I don't see how the fact that only your pedigreed cat among four had health issues relates to my post. Sometimes, staying silent would be more dignified.
- Josy (Second class member):* Such arrogance, I was seeking support. Well done. A real gentleman.

- Franz (First class member):* What does being a gentleman have to do with this? I pointed out an objective fact: your comment has nothing to do with mine.
- Josy (Second class member):* Telling someone to stay silent for dignity and implying a woman doesn't understand demonstrates your manners. I'm leaving, goodbye.
- Franz (First class member):* It's clear you didn't understand the post's meaning. Saying I pointed that out rudely is a fantasy in your head.
- Josy (Second class member):* You are very rude. I've seen it in other messages too.
- Franz (First class member):* I'll repeat this to avoid being truly rude: I invite you to leave the group, ok? Or if you prefer, I'll kick you out myself... politely, of course.
- Josy (Second class member):* A true gentleman... I hope your followers realize this and that you are forced to stop profiting from cats. You think you're superior, but you're just a big jerk.
- Franz (First class member):* Regarding those who choose to rely on me as a breeder, let's say my 11 years of honorable breeding speak for themselves, and I believe the people who have one of my cats are more than satisfied. Here are some people who have chosen to rely on me for their kitten selection @ Alba @ Antonio @Mary @Leo and who might explain why they did so. I could continue, but I don't want to bother more people, and I've only mentioned the first ones that come to mind.

After the initial cyberbullying, the victim expresses her desire to leave the group. The aggressor then fiercely urges her to do so, rallying other members of the micro-group to join in the attack, ensuring that the victim gets silenced and ostracized.

- Alba (First class member):* This is Whitney, and I got her from Franz's cattery. We didn't choose a cattery by chance. We're not here to argue... we're here to clarify.
- Mary (First class member):* This is Pythagoras. Today, Mr. Franz, who has been a friend for eight years along with his partner, helped me with a problem involving a cat that wasn't theirs. There hasn't been a single time when our breeder wasn't there for us. Do as you wish. We're just advising you to be cautious of backyard breeders.
- Leo (First class member):* I confirm every word Franz has said. He has always been my choice because, even just from the information he shared on Facebook, I could see there's a world beyond mere tests and valid analyses. Most importantly, I now know I have a breeder who supports me and my two wonderful cats, guiding me every step of the way.

Antonio (First class member): Franz, I couldn't have made a better choice than trusting you and your cattery.

This escalation of cyberbullying unfolds like a meticulously rehearsed drama, seemingly orderly yet inexorable. The amplification discourages other users, particularly those considered second class, from supporting the victim, thereby solidifying the cyberbullying and deepening the marginalization of the victim's voice. By the culmination of the attack, the victim, as expressed in their statement, experiences disappointment, ultimately choosing to silence themselves, effectively exiting the social media community to escape the abuse.

In the community, harsh conversations frequently escalate following trigger events, with second class members frequently becoming targets of *personal* insults. In these situations, victims often attempt to respond a few times to offensive and passive-aggressive remarks. However, feeling overwhelmed by multiple aggressors, they quickly choose to silence themselves and withdraw from the conversation. Noteworthy, they fluidly and rapidly exit the discussion as soon as they realize that the group's primary function is to suppress meaningful dialogue.

Franz's post (First class member):

This video aims to counter the argument made by a certain individual who thinks it's normal for a 3-month-old kitten to weigh 500 g. Here's a 1-month-old kitten from our latest litter, already weighing 650 g. Clearly, I must be a poor breeder since I raise obese cats.

Louisa (Second class member):

But are all humans tall, blond, with blue eyes, beautiful and slim? I've received offers to buy deaf Scottish Fold kittens for hundreds of euros from breeders you highly regard.

Tatiana (First class member):

Louisa, you've just joined this group and haven't even introduced yourself, yet you're starting arguments here?

Franz (First Class Member):

What Does that Even Mean? and Who Are You?

Louisa (Second class member):

Let me introduce myself, I am Louisa. I've had a Scottish Straight kitten for over a month, without a pedigree. I posted my comment after seeing a heated debate among breeders, each claiming their cats were superior and shaming others for selling cats that don't meet breed standards. My stance is that the health of the cat is what matters most, as perfection is unattainable for both humans and cats. I also want to highlight that some top breeders sell deaf kittens at high prices. Be cautious!

Franz (First class member):

Unfortunately, foolish people are always around... No one mentioned breed standards,

just health, and the kittens in question were unhealthy, making your comment irrelevant and inappropriate. Kittens must be bought by scrupulous breeders. Cats should be bought from reputable catteries.

Jeremia (First class member):

I agree with Franz.

Michael (First class member):

I totally agree with Franz . I bought a cat from their cattery and my cat is healthy and I never felt alone in his raising.

Louisa (Second class member):

I thought this group was something else. A community where to collect information. But ok. I leave. Stay here discussing among yourselves, I go.

Through all these conversations, first class members advocating for buying cats exclusively from “serious and qualified” catteries dominate the discourse. This viewpoint gradually solidifies as the only acceptable stance for members who want to remain part of the community. This singular norm subtly manipulates the community by suppressing discussion and awareness of alternative options.

Ultimately, the community’s discourse restricts choices and perpetuates a narrow view on pet acquisition. This exclusionary, technocapitalist, market-driven mentality, along with restricting individual freedom of thought and building hierarchies between breeders, pet owners and cats, end up reinforcing commodification dynamics of cats that enhance market leadership and premium pricing behaviors of breeders that escalate the spiral of economic exploitation of animals for the pleasure of humans.

2.4 Conclusions

Social media platforms, initially conceived as bridges for fostering connection and the free exchange of ideas (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Cova, 1997), have increasingly evolved into landscapes where abuses can flourish. Within this platforms, social media communities, envisioned as spaces for inclusivity and dialogue (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), are progressively becoming arenas for a chilling phenomenon known as the spiral of silence (Chen, 2018; Connolly & Connolly, 2012; Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Sohn, 2022). This phenomenon manifests through the systematic silencing of opinions and identities within these digital spaces and it is primarily exacerbated by dynamics of cyberbullying and marginalization. These harmful behaviors indeed paralyze victims, compelling them to self-censor their ideas and eventually withdraw from these community out of disappointment. Moreover, such forms of harassment silence bystanders who witness the abuse, fearing they may be targeted next. Consequently, this pervasive silencing effectively allows a dominant opinion to emerge within the community, typically aligning with the perspectives of the aggressors.

While these silencing effects mirror the classic spiral of silence as theorized by Noelle-Neumann (1974), they are indeed harsher. Unlike the traditional model, where the dominant opinion emerged from authoritative figures wielding institutional power derived from democratic consensus, in online groups, dominant narratives are imposed by self-appointed micro-groups. These groups act like a solid pack to enforce their leadership through acts of marginalization and silencing. Consequently, the recognized norm is not deemed right or accountable by the majority of users remaining in the community but follows the interests of these micro-groups, typically the aggressors.

Secondly, victims caught in the spiral of silence driven by cyberbullying and marginalization experience profound disappointment and a sense of disengagement. This often leads them not only to suppress their opinions but also to impose self-ostracism from the community where they once felt a sense of belonging.

According to Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory (1974), individuals fear disconnection and thus refrain from expressing dissenting views exactly to remain in the reference group avoiding self-imposed or forced social exclusion as the disengagement would be too painful for them. In contrast with that, our findings show that disappointed members decide to exit from the group quite swiftly and fluidly, as soon as they realize that meaningful discussion is unattainable within the community. This mechanism is typical of techno-mediated communities, where the dynamics of access and exit are exceedingly liquid, reflecting the ephemeral nature of relationships within these groups.

Lastly, as illustrated in Fig. 2.5, the silencing perpetuated through abuses on social media communities compels remaining members to conform to the emerging dominant narrative set by self-appointed micro-groups. This establishes a hegemony of thoughts and behaviors within the community that *serves the specific interests* of the members of the micro-group. In essence, the culmination of the spiral of silence in the tacitus trap (Kang et al., 2023) phase of the cyberbullying process, leads to the manipulation of opinions and specific behaviors among those still active in the community. This coercive influence reinforces specific power dynamics within the community, dictated and imposed by self-appointed opinion leaders.

Our case study vividly illustrates the extended effects of the spiral of silence within social media communities. In the SFS Facebook community analyzed, we observed the dominant presence of a leading micro-group of users who asserted their social and market influence through strategies of marginalization. Their discursive strategies intensely centered on the commodification of cats, outwardly presenting them as cherished family members while covertly treating them as status symbols and contested market objects. Cats became the determining factor in whether their owners were deemed worthy of interaction and inclusion in the micro-group or subjected to assault, silencing, and marginalization. Specifically, cats, and by extension their owners, were judged based on their awards and the catteries from which they were purchased. If the cattery was not approved by the micro-group, this triggered immediate condemnation of the owners. These owners faced brutal insults and were consequently isolated in the community for not complying with the micro-leadership's preferences.

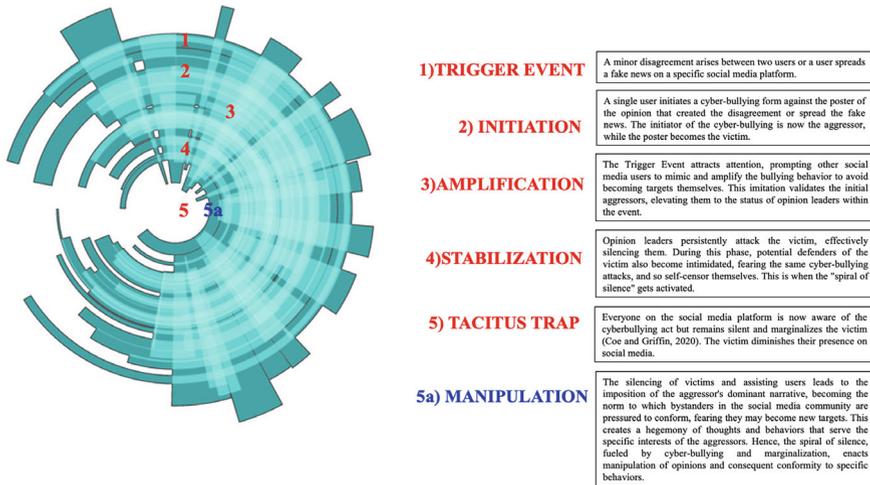


Fig. 2.5 The cyberbullying process culminating in the manipulation of remaining social media users (Source Elaboration of the authors from the model by Kang and colleagues [2023])

This relentless harassment ensured that the micro-group’s endorsement of specific breeders and their market position became the prevailing narrative, compelling remaining members, intimidated by the aggression observed, to conform to these preferences. Therefore, within this community, it is vividly evident that the spiral of silence driven by online bullying and marginalization not only suppresses dissent but also manipulates opinions. This manipulation, particularly in coercing consumer preferences, extends to establish market dominance that favors specific breeders.

Therefore, this chapter contributes to advancing literature on the spiral of silence in social media, highlighting its insidious connection with cyberbullying and marginalization dynamics, and uncovering previously unexplored effects within online communities, particularly manipulation in support of market dynamics. The case study we present contributes to a better understanding of technocapitalism by demonstrating how the spiral of silence can be weaponized to establish market dominance. In online communities, indeed, free expression and diverse opinions are ruthlessly silenced, and can be subordinated to profit-driven agendas, as seen in the SFS community. Typically, the interest at the center of the community serves as a cautionary tale, revealing the manipulative forces that can lurk beneath the seemingly benign facade of social media.

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Chapter 3

The Megaphone and the Spiral of Silence: The Advent of Hindutva in Mauritius



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3.1 Introduction and Approach

Public opinion is an important feature of any society. Despite the liberalization of discourse, the democratization of media and the availability of technology, people are not always willing to speak. How is public opinion formed and ultimately sustained? This brings us to Noelle–Neuman’s theory of silence (1974) that people gauge the way opinion is shaping and if their views are not conforming to the dominant one, they would rather censor themselves than go in a war of words. Obviously, this theory was elaborated for a traditional mass media context. Is the “fear of isolation” that entails self-censorship valid within the digital sphere?

Certain scholars argue that the theory of spiral of silence is reinvigorated online through the possibility of anonymity (Woong Yun & Park, 2011) and the dynamics of online chatrooms (Wanta & Dimitrova, 2000). Initially viewed with optimism, the digital sphere is increasingly disavowed by researchers (Brown, 2017; Mirchandani, 2018) who argue that the internet can amplify rage and noise and in the process silence people’s civic expression. This is more so when it comes to “culture talk” (Mamdani, 2002) that politicizes religious identity and undermines citizenship and democracy. One should also bear in mind that digital platforms are today operating within a context of disinformation and fake news—an important consideration especially for political news.

This chapter will provide a country focus of the island of Mauritius celebrated for its multiculturalism and linguistic diversity. Mauritius has no indigenous people but is populated by people from Africa (slavery), India (indentured labour), Europe (white settlers), and China (merchants) forming a “Mauritian kaleidoscope” (Dinan, 1986).

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The Mauritian Constitution categorizes its population into four ethnic communities namely the Hindus, Muslims, Chinese and the General Population. The Hindus are assigned as the “majority” group while the other communities are categorized as “minority” groups. In fact, this categorisation is believed to be outdated and arbitrary as the last time that Mauritians were asked to identify themselves along any of these communities was during the 1972 census.

During elections, political parties have systematically used identity politics appealing to different groups to achieve a consociational democracy. However, the weaponization of ethno-religious identity through social media to foster Hindu nationalism and ideology is a novel phenomenon that is gaining traction in the Mauritian digital media ecology. This chapter attempts to shed light on—how is Hindu nationalism and ideology manufactured digitally to polarize society along ethno-religious lines and in the process “cancels” the possibilities of open participation and debate. Three case studies are used starting with a specific example that happened during the 2019 general election culminating with an event in early 2024 that demonstrate how Hindu nationalism is manufactured to uphold religious majoritarianism that obfuscates the peaceful multicultural and multiethnic image that the island has been projecting. Put otherwise, the spectre of Hindu nationalism hinges on reactionary digital politics and polarizes the Mauritian polity.

Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence has taken new configurations in the ecosystem of digital media. Edited images and videos sustained through troll armies mainstream a divisive narrative and in the process trigger the spiral of silence. In other words, social media has become a noisy space that can weaponize religious symbols and imageries and provoke outrage “by those who claim to have been offended” (George, 2016). Advancing the concept of “hate spin”, George distinguishes between incitement and offence making. According to him, incitement is when hate speech is deliberately professed while offence making is more pernicious as reactionary groups claim to have been offended and express “righteous indignation”. This “culture of offendedness” is manufactured and weaponized by reactionary groups to coerce political adversaries and in the process of bashing.

Mamdani opines (2002, p. 766) that “culture talk” is the “predilection to define cultures according to their presumed “essential” characteristics, especially as regards politics.” He argues that the modern project of the West has categorized Muslims into “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims” as he notes that “the terrorists of September 11, we are told, did not just hijack planes, they also hijacked Islam” and that this “clash is inside” (pp. 767–768) as “good Muslims” have to be differentiated from “bad Muslims, rather than terrorists from civilians” (p. 766).

This chapter proposes to adopt the same framework when it comes to the Hindus. The recent rise of India as a possible global power and the nationalist movement of Narendra Modi has drawn a fault line between Hindus—the ‘good’, the ‘bad’ and the ‘powerful’. While playing the card of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Hindu, the ‘good’ Hindu is morphed into a ‘powerful’ Hindu. The “good” Hindu views himself as part of the majority, is highly emotional about his religion, is offended and scapegoats and coerces political opponents. The ‘good’ Hindu chooses the cult of personality and leadership who plays by the rule book of the ‘good’, ‘bad’ and is transformed

into the ‘powerful’ Hindu. Social media has become the space where the power game of Hindutva is played out and, in its shadow, lurks the spiral of silence that coerces and shuts down the ‘bad’ Hindu and others.

How does this juxtaposition between “good”, “bad” and “powerful” Hindus play out in Mauritius? An island often referred to as ‘Little India’ and where India’s geopolitical and economic powers are gaining in strength. To what extent is social media instrumentalised to spread and amplify the Hindu narrative be it at the level of politics, religion and culture? In a nutshell—how is the spiral of silence activated?

3.2 Diversity and Pluralism in the Mauritian Media

Situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean, Mauritius has been shaped by different colonial players—the Dutch, French and British. The French and British who were present on the island for 250 years (1715–1968) had the greatest influence on the island’s economic, political and social structure. It is interesting to note that under French presence the first newspaper was launched in 1773 making it the earliest publication in the Southern hemisphere. The island had become a flourishing plantocracy and the newspaper—*Affiches, Annonces et Avis Divers* was essentially used to inform and advertise for the sale of slaves and other official information by the then colonial power (Chan-Meetoo, 2018). Despite becoming a British colony in 1810, additional newspapers were all in French—*Le Cerneen* (1831) and *Le Mauricien* (1833). Evidence points to the fact that the British were not really interested to anglicize the colony (Kasenny, 2007) and that nothing was done to jeopardize or change the position of privilege and influence of the existing French white settlers (*Acte de Capitulation*, Article 8). Newspapers quickly became a form of political emancipation among the Indian indentured labourers (that had come to work in sugar plantations following the abolition of slavery) and subsequently a growing Indo-Mauritian political elite that was closely linked to discussions around the independence of the island. The creation of *The Hindustani* (1909) and *The Advance* (1940) are cases in point. As for broadcast (television) services it was launched in 1964 (four years prior to independence) and seen as an important tool towards the island’s independence.

Post independent Mauritius witnessed an expansion of media titles, the partial liberalization of the airwaves and the advent of media businesses. Private radio stations were launched in 2002 namely—Radio Plus, Radio One and Top FM. In 2019, two new licensees were authorized namely Wazaa FM and Planet FM but the latter’s licence was cancelled due to financial problems. These private radio stations have been crucial in allowing political engagements and participation of ordinary citizens who previously had no platform for expression (Chenganna, 2022).

Mauritius is considered as one of the most advanced digitalised African countries having achieved digital switchover in 2015, has a multiplicity of mobile providers, has some registered 2.3 million SIMs and some 350 Wi-Fi hotspots with free 10 MB Internet connection through Optical Fibre across the island. In 2018, the Mauritian

Government launched the Digital Mauritius 2030 strategic plan to further accelerate the digitalisation of the island along five key pillars: digital government, ICT infrastructure, innovation, talent management and cybersecurity (Mauritius, 2020). In terms of social media metrics latest statistics mention 942,800 Facebook users representing 84% of the Mauritian population. Facebook (owned by Meta) by far overtakes any other social media platforms be it Instagram (also owned by Meta) or Twitter. This heavy reliance on Facebook as a means of communication and source of information can be problematic if the information ecosystem is not properly managed. Round 9 of the Afrobarometer survey (2023) for Mauritius highlights that more than seven out of ten (73%) respondents mentioned that they get news on a daily basis from social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and others. What also needs to be factored in is the propensity among political parties/leaders/candidates to use Facebook as a means of communication and as expected this peaks significantly during an election campaign.

Tensions: Media—State

Written, broadcast and social media operate within very different legal and regulatory frameworks. Written media functions along an individualized self regulated approach with each media title/house operating along its own code of conduct. There have been multiple attempts to bring them together using a co-regulation approach model (Robertson Report, 2013) but to no avail. Despite this ‘relatively’ free environment, the written media falls under the Mauritian Criminal Code (1838) pertaining to issues of sedition, defamation and the publication of false news which are all punishable offences.

In the case of broadcast media there seems to be two sets of laws and rules for private / commercial media and state media. As mentioned earlier private radio came into existence in the early 2000s and is licenced and regulated by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA). As for state media (radio and television) it is governed by the MBC Act (1982) and does not fall under the purview of the IBA while online media is regulated by the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (ICTA). Data is also an important part of the Mauritian information landscape, and the island enacted a Data Protection in 2017 enabling the creation of a Data Protection Commissioner.

Tensions have always existed between those in power and the media, and this is considered to be both a normal and healthy relationship. The island’s democratic tradition since independence where the ballot as opposed to the bullet was privileged allowed the media to operate in a relatively open and non confrontational manner. However, there were two significant episodes when there was a head to head confrontation where the very existence of a free and independent media was compromised. In 1970, the government of the day instituted a state of emergency that saw a repressive clamp down on opposition political parties and the written media. Public gatherings were forbidden under a Public Order Act and the content of newspapers

were heavily censored (Bräutigam, 1997). In 1984, a Newspaper and Periodicals Bill was proposed which required proprietors to deposit a large sum of money for their newspapers to operate. Fortunately, in both cases these were short lived measures due to the resilience of media owners and journalists to push back.

In more recent years, the island's much cherished democratic credentials have been drastically backsliding. In 2022 Mauritius was classified 'among the top 10 autocratising countries' by the Varieties in Democracy Report and by 2024 it had become an electoral autocracy (V Dem Report, 2024). This democratic backsliding has had an adverse effect on political rights, civil liberties and media freedom where restriction and backlash against citizens and journalists have become recurrent.

In fact, the shrinking of civic space has to a large extent been 'aided' by regulatory bodies such as the ICTA and IBA that have lost their independence and impartiality. For example, a controversial clause of the ICTA Act (2001) that stipulates that anyone who *"uses an information and communication service, including telecommunication service, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to any person shall commit an offence"* (Sect. 46 (h)). A number of citizens were arrested under that clause following complaints by politicians who felt offended by their posts which can carry a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment. Following a case upheld by the Mauritian Supreme Court this clause was repealed in 2021. Conscious of the gaining popularity of social media platforms among citizens, the ICTA in April 2021 circulated a consultation paper entitled 'Regulate the use and addressing the abuse and misuse of social media'. The rationale was to address the "growing problem of harmful and illegal online content" in a manner that is not dependent on international social media companies. What was considered as the most outrageous proposal was to "deploy a new technical toolset to segregate from all incoming and outgoing Internet traffic in Mauritius, social media traffic, which will then need to be decrypted, re-encrypted and archived for inspection purposes as and when required". The technical toolset would have required internet users in Mauritius to go through a local proxy server for the decryption, archiving and inspection. Due to massive pushback both locally and internationally the consultation paper was shelved.

As for the IBA, a number of amendments have been brought to the IBA Act (2001) to impose greater restrictions on the functioning of private radio stations. The introduction of the "Due Impartiality" regulations in 2022 have to a large extent dampened the enthusiasm of radio managers to hold robust and lively debates insofar that these regulations have been interpreted as requesting radio stations to solicit the viewpoints of government representatives or spokespersons to counteract opposing viewpoints broadcasted on air. Over the past two years, journalists critical of the government have been dismissed and have been replaced by journalists' voices that are less influential and/or that are directly related to the government. Intimidations include the circulation of fake news against radio journalists and these intimidations come on the heels of the 2021 Independent Broadcasting (Amendment) Act which gives the IBA the authority to ask radio journalists to reveal their sources and in case of non-compliance, journalists face the risk of imprisonment of up to five years and a fine of 500,000 rupees. With the 2021 amendments, the renewal of private radio

licences has been brought to a period of one year (instead of three years) and the licence fees have doubled (RSF, 2021).

Despite its vitality, the Mauritian media landscape has been subjected to several attempts of political control. As indicated above, social media has gained popularity and is invested by political parties. It would be assumed that social media would have broadened public discussion and debate. However, the clampdown on social media through regulatory interventions have restricted social media as discussion platforms and have had a chilling effect on public opinion limiting their democratic potential as discussion avenues.

Contextualisation of the ‘Spiral of Silence’: The Rise of Hindu Nationalism Post 2019

Although Mauritius was able to negotiate a bloodless transition towards independence—44% of the population voted against independence as there was a clear fear of the “Hindu peril” (Bunwaree, 2002; Cowaloosur, 2013; Seegobin & Collen, 1977). This “Hindu peril” was essentially interpreted by white and mulattoes as a complete takeover of political, economic and cultural power. However, the government that took the leadership of the country just after independence reached out to all political stakeholders and constituted a government of national unity (Kasenally, 2018). Unfortunately, over time ethnopolitics exacerbated by the prevailing Best Loser System, the tacit understanding that a Hindu (of a particular caste) should always be Prime Minister and the presence of sociocultural groups created a division and difference within the Mauritian society. Mainstream political parties used it for political gain despite preaching a discourse of unity, diversity and inclusion (Kasenally, 2011).

Identity politics became fertile ground for the presence and ultimately the rise of Hindu nationalism in Mauritius. Why has this manifested and taken ampleur after 56 years of the country’s independence? Is it visible among certain age segments? One of the narratives that has been instrumental is that Mauritius is ‘Little India’. This to a certain extent was justified as part of the population’s historical and cultural lineage. If this is the justification—why not ‘Little Africa’ or ‘Little China’? Intertwined with the ‘Little India’ narrative is the understanding that the Hindus in Mauritius are considered the majority group and hence have an upper hand on the political, cultural and social decisions. This to a great extent has been encouraged by certain political leaders who use it for political gain as the Hindus constitute a significant vote base especially in the rural area. However, what has been observed over time is the intensification of a certain brand of Hindu nationalism especially post 2019 where the government led by the ruling party has increasingly aligned itself with the politics of the BJP in India. Local cells of the BJP as well as the Hindutva and Shiv Sena exist in Mauritius and have to a certain extent used social media as a conduit for spreading their ideological message.

Mauritian mainstream political parties declare that they espouse politics from the centre. In the void of political ideologies, religious affiliation has become a factor of mobilization. It is not surprising that religion is assimilated to a political marker in Mauritian politics and that Hindu nationalism has recently found new spaces of expansion on social media. While an informed citizenry requires that citizens are exposed to accurate information, online religious zeal has the attributes of political influence but also of ostracizing minority others and allowing the spiral of silence to crawl online.

Three case studies have been selected that aptly demonstrate the ‘good Hindu’ / ‘bad Hindu’ juxtaposition connected to the zero tolerance towards alternative views in the name of offence and finally the exteriorisation of Hindu nationalism as a version that the Mauritian Hindu must be proud to identify and support. They are inherently interlinked aimed at silencing and intimidating other voices.

3.3 Social Media Footprint of Hindu Nationalist Groups

As mentioned in an earlier section, Facebook is the most used social media platform in Mauritius. Most political leaders have used (and continue to use) the platform during and between elections and in the general elections of 2019 there was a real explosion of lives, outreach campaigns and other political messaging. This enthusiasm for the platform is visible among certain groups that realize the potential of occupying or even capturing the digital space. This seems to be the case among a number of Hindu branded groups who have developed and invested in an online presence. Three case studies have been chosen to reflect the rise of Hindu nationalism and the proposition that it represents the majoritarian view. Table 3.1 provides a breakdown of the most visible and active Hindu groups that have invested in the construction of a Hindu nationalist metanarrative described in the three case studies. It should be noted that three of them have been created just before and after the 2019 general elections which is considered to be the inflection point when a bolder and more aggressive form of Hindu nationalism manifests itself both off and online.

Table 3.1 Facebook footprint of Hindu groups in Mauritius

Name	Followers	Status	Creation date
Proud Hindu	258,000	Religious organisation	November 2009
United Hindus Mauritius	41,000	Hindu activists	June 2020
Hindutva movement (Mauritius)	12,000	Community	November 2017
Radio Katori TV	15,000	Media/news	November 2019
Sun power	5000	Digital creator	September 2020

Source Facebook

The ‘Katori’ Episode

The dichotomy between allegedly ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Hindus feeds into and reinforces the narratives of Hindu nationalism. Transposed to Mauritian politics, it can boil down to the cult built around political leaders and this has been more recently visible between the leader of the ‘Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien’—Pravind Jugnauth and that of the leader of the Mauritius Labour Party—Navin Ramgoolam. The spin about Jugnauth presents him as an allegedly ‘good’ Hindu in opposition to Ramgoolam. It is along this fault line that trolls were weaponized in the 2019 election as part of political disinformation to represent Ramgoolam as a ‘bad’ Hindu who allegedly slandered the Hindu. Ramgoolam’s party had organized a public gathering in a predominantly Muslim area. While addressing the crowd, Ramgoolam referred in his speech to the alleged greed of his political adversaries and used an analogy of a Hindu folk practice in villages whereby for the soul of the greedy to depart, they boil money in a Katori (an Indian term meaning a recipient) and pour the water in the mouth of the dying for the soul to depart. The off-the-cuff remark about death and greed in the political speech of Ramgoolam was essentially directed against his political adversary (the Jugnauth family) but was trumped up to make it appear as if he had offended the whole Hindu community in front of the Muslims. The content was edited, decontextualised and widely circulated online (Facebook, WhatsApp and SMS) as a way to sign post to the Hindus, especially those from conservative rural areas, that they had been mocked.

The false claim stormed social media through partisan trolls, Hindu vigilante groups and Hindu sociocultural organizations and was shared via WhatsApp. In the process moderate voices were silenced. Hindu sociocultural organizations close to the Jugnauth’s government were given airtime on MBC, the state broadcaster, as they talked religiously and expressed outrage. On the eve of the 2019 election, this manipulated content coupled with other denigrating videos and materials had become the linchpin of the electoral campaign supported through the online outrage of the Hindu vigilante groups who expressed “righteous” indignation over the alleged offence.

In fact, Radio Katori TV that was created following the episode was instrumental in flooding its Facebook page with posts, videos and photos warning Ramgoolam of the possible backlash following his speech. The two stills below posted on the eve of the 2019 general elections are warning signs for having caused offence to the Hindu community. See Figs. 3.1 and 3.2.

Communalism coupled with political disinformation also foregrounds religious mythmaking in politics insofar that the Hindus and the electorate had to distinguish between a pseudo ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Hindu which intersects with principles of the ‘good’ Hindu as a masculine and purposeful protector of women among other things. In the face of such Hindutva politics, the nationalist and ethnic version of Hinduism, secular nationalism was sidelined, and political talks was overridden by religious talks. Coupled to such disinformation are algorithms that put front and centre the religious ‘offense’, irrespective of whether it is true or fake. Algorithms amplify



Fig. 3.1 Translation: Navin Ramgoolam mocked the Hindus in Plaine Verte, on thursday the Hindus will sanction you—Facebook Page of Radio Katori Video on 6 November 2019



Fig. 3.2 Translation: The Hindus [living] in villages love money, when they are dying, they do not die, they whine, then they will take bank notes, put in a katori, roll it, boil it, make them drink and then their soul will depart—Facebook page Radio Katori, 6 November 2019

polarization and ironically Facebook becomes complicit in fostering ethnic nationalism as not only does it not moderate content in Mauritian Creole language, but it also provides a platform where politicians can express soft hate speech in the forms of communal talks that go undetected on the digital platforms.

In fact, what is a matter of concern is that the tagging of the ‘bad’ Hindu versus the ‘good’ Hindu that started with the ‘Katori’ episode has gained in ascendancy and the two political leaders are regularly showcased on the Facebook pages of Hindutva



Fig. 3.3 Radio Katori TV Facebook page (August 27, 2020)—Depicting Navin Ramoolam as a ‘bad Hindu’

Movement (Mauritius) and Radio Katori TV as what they want to portray as two distinct categories of Hindu political leaders as evidenced below. See Figs. 3.3 and 3.4.

Joanna Berenger Case

Trolling as a political tool is not only used during election times. It has become a tool to intimidate, ostracize and harass political opponents and to level up accusations of “Hindu bashing” against them. Off-election period in 2022, Joanna Berenger, an opposition member of the parliament, posted a proverb in Mauritian Kreol on her social media page. The proverb read “Mange Bondie KK diab” (meaning “to eat God and to poo the devil”) referring to somebody who is a hypocrite or two faced. Berenger linked her post to that of a picture of Pravind Jugnauth accomplishing prayer rites. Her post within hours went viral and played into the hands of Hindu vigilante groups, Hindu sociocultural groups as well as parliamentarians of the ruling party who expressed offence, outrage and called for her immediate resignation. The backlash against her was harsh branding her a witch, a racist and someone insensitive to the island’s social and racial harmony. In fact, matters escalated when the President



Fig. 3.4 Hindutva Facebook Page (8 March 2023)—Depicting Pravin Jugnauth as a ‘good Hindu’

of the Voice of Hindu lodged a case against Berenger at the police headquarters for having insulted the Hindu community. See Fig. 3.5.

The post divided Mauritians—with some praising the richness of Mauritian Kreol and its proverbial allegories while others felt that the association was hurtful and insensitive. This case is linked to a larger issue that has regularly plagued the Mauritian socio-political setup—race and colour. Berenger is from the Franco Mauritian



Fig. 3.5 Protest by the Voice of Hindu against Joanna Berenger, 18 July 2022 (Source MAU News)

community and is associated with the island's past colonial master—France. In the past there have been regular episodes where Berenger's father, Paul Berenger (leader of the *Mouvement Militant Mauricien*) has been the target of vitriolic and hateful comments from Hindu groups. This case seems to demonstrate the asymmetry when it comes to experiencing offence and insult. Those groups that have taken the mantle of 'protecting' the Hindu religion are quick on the trigger to voice out and flare up at the slightest episode where they believe that their religion is under attack. Not only do they crowd out alternative voices and interpretations but the duty to protect is what a 'good Hindu' does.

The Ram Mandir Case

The inauguration of the Ram Mandir in January 2024 in Ayodhya in India was celebrated as a moment of "Hindu awakening" (Gupta, 2024) through the 'return' of Lord Ram. Prime Minister Modi presided the consecration of the Hindu temple on a contested site where previously laid the Babri Mosque which was razed by Hindu nationalists. On the consecration of the temple, Modi announced the "beginning of a new era" and "likened it to "the day India gained independence" (Serhan, 2024). In Mauritius the event was celebrated to mirror the festivities in India with the subtext being that Mauritius is 'Little India'. Mauritian authorities were enthused with the inauguration and Mauritius was singled out as the only country in the Indian diaspora to grant to public officials of Hindu belief a special leave on that occasion and Mauritian public institutions live screened the events from India.

In India, the Mauritian government was congratulated for being the "first country to take leave" (NEWS9, 2024) and this was relayed on Mauritian state radio and television which hyped the event with a daily countdown to the inauguration to garner the loyalty of Mauritian Hindus. Mapped on the good and bad Hindu template, the good Mauritian Hindu is called upon to show loyalty to the celebrations marking 'Ram's return' and to the Hindutva project while the bad one would lament the weaponization of religion in the public sphere and the weakening of the national fabric.

The event was celebrated with great pomp across the island from organized car rallies, street gatherings, houses adorned with flags of the effigy of Lord Ram. This was reverberated through the Facebook pages of groups such as 'Proud Hindu' and 'United Hindus Mauritius'. In the case of 'Proud Hindu' the message is to both occupy the physical and online space and a call that a good Hindu proudly shows adheres to the rites, rituals and values of Hinduism. See Fig. 3.6.

However, what was far much concerning was the call for attention and action by the 'United Hindus Mauritius' to "saffronise Mauritius" and not to remove your "Bhagwa Dhwaaj" flag. The two posts below are unequivocally a digital *cri de guerre* to take control and paint the island in the colour of Hindutva. See Figs. 3.7 and 3.8.

Flags were distributed across the island to Hindu families to be placed on their rooftops and yards for visual impact. It is no coincidence that the saffron-coloured



Fig. 3.6 Facebook page of the proud Hindu Group on 22 January 2024 at the Ram Mandir Rally

Ram flag is reminiscent of the colour of the Indian Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and the Mauritian Militant Socialist Movement (MSM). In fact, one can speak of the endorsement/legitimization of the Ram Mandir event in Mauritius not only at the national level but also through a post by Prime Minister Modi praising the “Ram devotees from Mauritius”. See Fig. 3.9.

The quasi national celebration of the Ram Mandir event in Mauritius caused the intensification of populism around two Hindu religious festivals that were subsequently celebrated—that of Maha Shivaratri and Holi. Both were celebrated in a much bolder and touting manner, calling upon ‘good Hindus’ to make themselves vocal and visible. In the case of Maha Shivarati which is a yearly celebration which begins with a pilgrimage to the sacred lake of Ganga Talao, social media was used to flare up the idea that Hindus—the ‘good’ ones need to demonstrate their devotion by carrying oversized Kawars (structures representing the Hindu deity Shiva) to the lake. This strategy of digital flaming often takes the forms of online posts that incite Hindus to build bigger Kawars as a show of Hindu power prompted by Hindu activists and influencers forbidding the authorities to act against oversized Kawars. Sadly, in 2024, six young pilgrims were fatally electrocuted as their oversized Kawars caught fire after the collision with high intensity electric cables.



Fig. 3.7 Screenshot of the post from 'United Hindus Mauritius'

Megaphone Versus Silence: The Amplification of Mauritian Hindutva

The chapter has demonstrated how the theory of spiral of silence has found new ground on social media particularly on Facebook where it lurks in the shadow and is prompted to the fore through the politics of Hindu nationalism as it has been practised recently in Mauritian politics. Scheufle and Moy (2000, p. 10) point out that “the process of the spiral of silence only works for issues with a moral component” as they observe that public opinion does not revolve around the “right” or the “wrong” “but on what is good or bad” (Scheufle & Moy, 2000, p. 13). Notwithstanding identity politics as it has been traditionally practised in the multicultural context of Mauritius, the ‘Hindutva turn’ in Mauritian politics is a novel phenomenon where religious influence is digitally mediated and can be traced back to the 2019 Mauritian election.

‘Hindutva’ politics orbits around the online manufacture of the binaries of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Hindu and is performed through the virtue signalling of Mauritian political leaders and as they oust the ‘bad’ version in their political counterparts.



Fig. 3.8 Screenshot of the post from ‘United Hindus Mauritius’

To this effect, the chapter has pointed out how the categories of offendedness over alleged offences to the Hindu identity as well as Hindu chauvinism and assertiveness form part of the conjuncture of Hindutva. Hence Hindutva politics conflates religion and politics and coercively builds political allegiance to the narratives of the ‘good’ Hindu through the cult of personality. Such “culture talk” (Mamdani, 2002) has a chilling effect on public opinion. In traditional Mauritian politics, such religiously influenced culture wars would have been confined to the margins of fanatic politics and would have remained subterranean. However, they have found new spaces on social media as they are turbocharged on social media through algorithms, Hindu vigilante groups and partisan army trolls. Contra to the ‘megaphone’ volume of Hindutva politics, the spiral of silence cancels and forces off the tacit alienation and political disengagement of ‘others’ including Muslims and Christians and threatens the ethos of multiculturalism and democracy in Mauritius.



Fig. 3.9 Source Narendra Modi X Account

The Manufacture and Weaponization of Offence

Often issues of religion and ethnicity are neglected insofar that politics is thought to revolve around civic talks and citizenship. However, this chapter has attempted to demonstrate how religious talks of Hindutva intersect with issues of race, ethnicity and gender. This is the case with the female member of parliament Joanna Beranger who has been trolled as being ‘anti-Hindu’ as her words were *detoured* to allegedly offend the Hindu community and this has been used against her as she is white, young, female and a member of the opposition party. From the manufacture of political offendedness around the Katori case in the 2019 election to the semantic confusion around the use of language in the case of Joanna Beranger and to the politics of saffronisation around the Ram Mandir the aim of a Mauritian version of Hindutva is to construct, enforce and ultimately legitimize Hindu dominance.

It has been argued that any form of extremist discourse is reinvigorated through online strategies that include trolling, astroturfing and flaming among others. Disinformation is conventionally thought of as involving sophisticated and high-tech techniques. However, this chapter has argued that political spin and disinformation that is associated to Hindutva politics often revolves around ‘cheapfakes’. Paris and Donovan (2019) reflect on ‘cheapfakes’ noting that they “allow[] manipulation through easy conventional editing techniques like speeding, slowing and cutting, as well as nontechnical manipulations like restaging or decontextualizing existing footage”. This is exactly what was done by the different Hindu groups referred to in Table 3.1 on their Facebook pages which have included altered videos and images, trolling, flaming and at times incendiary language with the aim of allowing the Hindutva to retain attention and relevance.

The 2019 election campaign and the ramifications referred to in this chapter point to these techniques that flooded social media. They involve techniques that create a climate of discrimination and exclusion in the ecosystem of Facebook and social media. However, such climate of alienation also leaves a strong lasting impression that Mauritius is increasingly projecting the image of “Little India” mirrored on the politics of Narendra Modi. Much to the contention of local politicians cynical and satirical Mauritians often refer to Mauritius as ‘Modiland’. In political terms, the recent Mauritius 2023 International Religious Freedom Report (US, 2024) notes that “some Christians and Muslims continued to state that the predominance of Hindus in the civil service favoured Hindus in government recruitment and promotion, preventing Christians and Muslims from reaching higher level positions in the civil service”.

The Majoritarianism Push

What place does the concept of a dominant group have in a plural and diverse society like Mauritius? As mentioned earlier in the chapter, as the island became independent the “Hindu peril” was flagged as an issue of concern and its possible impact on other communities. In fact, this tacit understanding that the Hindus constitute the dominant group allow them to a series of entitlement—the Prime Minister hails from the Hindu community so does the majority of people employed in the public sector and most key positions in public or parastatal bodies are held by Hindus. The ‘legitimation’ of the Hindus as the dominant community has been strengthened with the advent of a Mauritianised Hindutva. Propelled through algorithms Hindutva communicates the view of the majoritarian Hindu community and the minority ‘others’. Thence difference is imagined and hegemonized and public opinion is ‘suspended’ insofar that the noise of Hindutva drowns out alternative voices through the circulation of conspiracy theories, fearmongering clickbait images and videos. Any opportunity is maximized—a religious event, a political happening or simply filling social media with posts that glorify Hindutva as the reign of the majority.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has shed light on an underlying feature of the Mauritian society—the push and pull between a so-called majority and minorities, the ‘good Hindu’ versus the ‘bad Hindu’ and the offender and the offended. Multiplicity and diversity have been overshadowed by a Mauritianised Hindutva which is increasingly shaping the climate of opinions—shutting down dissent, protest or alternative opinions that are often labelled as offensive comments or Hindu bashing. An important observation is the asymmetry of offence and the three cases highlighted in this chapter demonstrate that the Hindu nationalists are trigger ready to protest loudly their “righteous indignation” in being offended. What is of concern is that the Hindu megaphone is given legitimacy by certain political and sociocultural actors.

Despite its novelty, social media is increasingly becoming the playground of Hindu nationalists. In its workings Hindutva has the effect of essentializing religious and ethnic identities and labelling others and tacitly works to silence, if not to shut down alternative and dissenting voices. Hindutva is not Hinduism. Hindutva is manipulative and discriminatory and through the theory of silence it works to disengage and silence others and to capture the public sphere. In the face of such religiously influenced trends, it is important to interrogate and expose them as forms of anti Mauritianess. To this effect, the theory of silence offers the framework to interrogate the tumults and silences in the digital and political spaces of Mauritius and the awareness that the assaults on Mauritian democracy require that citizens fight back such religious-cum-political extremes. What this chapter has exposed is no doubt the tip of iceberg when it comes to forms of extreme religious nationalism. The focus was on Hindu nationalism, which is loud, built on binaries and anchored in the belief that it represents the majority. It would be equally useful to conduct a similar exercise for other communities and see whether what techniques are being used to build their own narrative or push back against the Mauritian Hindutva.

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Chapter 4

The Understanding of Malaysian Youth Towards the Danger of ‘Cyber Racism’ on Interethnic Relationship on Social Media Platforms



Sara Chinnasamy and Nur Najiha Zainal Anuar

4.1 Introduction

The emergence of the new media into our daily life today has changed quite a lot of our views on the surrounding. Living with spectacular technologies around us, we are too attached with new media and getting tangled with them without knowing the implications that we might face later especially with the existence of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and so forth. The vast development of technology and the approach of the new media in modern times have changed the way we communicate and spread information (Adlina, n.d). However, as time goes by the problem of new media in Malaysia is getting serious day by day. In Malaysia, the new media is seen as an important tool especially for the youth. In today’s world, the new media technologies outlined a vital part of the younger generations’ lives and it has become a must to us to understand the keenest of younger generations to use new media and how new media is being used in their everyday life (Shanti et al., 2013). The new media can give positive implication to the youth in terms of communicating with other people because new media connects two people or more at different places.

Malaysia is a multiracial country with many different ethnics that has the citizen practicing different culture, religion, tradition, belief and so forth altogether. According to Index Mundi, as up till July 2016, the population in Malaysia is 30,949,962 with 24–54 age structure has the highest percentage of 41.06%. Adding up to that, the Index Mundi has reported that youth has the highest dependency ratio of 35.2% where as the largest ethnic group in Malaysia is Malay with 61.3% in percentage (CIA World Factbook, 2016). Multiracial brings the definition of made

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up of or relates to people with variety of races (Oxford University Press, 2017). There are many races in Malaysia but this study focuses more to the three main ethnics in Malaysia which is Malay, Chinese and Indian. These three main ethnics have lived together for a very long time and their well being in the development of interethnic relationship can be considered as overwhelming. The Malays are the Malaysia's largest ethnic group which makes up more than 50% of the whole population. The second largest ethnic group in Malaysia is Chinese which makes up 25% of the population and followed by Indians that makes up 10% of the population (Tourism Malaysia, 2017).

On the other hand, the new media also can give bad effect to a multiethnic country like Malaysia. In our country, Malaysia, the citizen is living in a multiethnic society where three main ethnics, Malay, Chinese and the Indians, with different religion and cultural background, it is necessary to identify the patterns of involvement in negative behaviors using the new media across ethnic (Fazilah, Wendy, Ezhar, Azimi & Wong, n.d). This is because the people use new media to express their feelings and emotions about other ethnics that involves sensitivity among netizen especially to the youth. No doubt that the importance of new media is expanding from time to time. Recently, new media or the Internet is used only to receive information but now since the World Wide Web is continuing to improve, the role of new media is more than just receiving information. With the existence of social media, Malaysians especially youth is liable to shift their attention from the traditional media to new media. Social media comprises extensive range of tools such as blogs, applications or micro-blogging like Twitter, video sharing like Youtube, photo sharing like Pinterest, social networks, video conferences, podcasts and so forth (Safurah et al., 2010). The youth in Malaysia is likely to have wide usage and more interest in social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Myspace. Based on Nielsen ratings, in December 2009, Facebook was the top social networking site with 206.9 million users that encompasses 67 percent of social networking users throughout the world (Safurah et al., 2010). This study is a study on the view of the Malaysian youth towards the danger of cyber racism on interethnic relationship among netizen in Klang Valley. This qualitative study is been done together with interviews with 6 Malaysian youth from different ethnics age range 20–30 years old. The study reveals how the Malaysian youth view on the danger of cyber racism on interethnic relationship among netizen in Klang Valley.

The new media in Malaysia is tremendously developing when there are numerous new websites and weblogs available nowadays (Balaraman et al., 2015). The new media or people call them as the alternative media is basically a medium that can reach the people locally and internationally (Balaraman et al., 2015). In 1960s, the term 'new media' has been used without putting any barrier to the communication technology. The definition of 'new' here is transference by cable, satellite and radio that will encourage the availability to send message it also includes the method of storing and retrieving, including the personal video recorders, CD-ROM, DVD, iPod and etc. The new media has intervened into the users' life and impacted the way of daily communication especially to the youth. Nowadays, people use the new media not only to gain information and latest updates but the new media has been used

to deliver information and spread newest update. Living in the information age, the new media plays a vital role to invite a more flexible and permeable surrounding especially in the networking site (Wan Munira, 2014). In Malaysia, the emergence of new media has somehow taken over the television and radio industry. This is because the people feel that the new media has so many positive outcomes such as the new media is more reliable and transparent compared to the mainstream media. Specifically, the younger generation is depending to the new media in their daily lives. The new media is used to receive information and also to blast out information to the people. However, the negative side of it is when people use new media to deliver false information on certain issues.

It can be seen that the new media or the alternative media is said to be as the heart to the youth in Malaysia. They receive information easily by surfing on to the Internet. With just one click, they already get the answers to their inquiries. As the research that was conducted by Madge et al. (2009) on an online survey among first year students of a British university that focuses to Facebook, the findings showed that Facebook is basically used to help students for their university lives and also for other social reasons and not for their formal learning purposes (Afendi et al., 2012). The online social networking that has rapidly showed their popularity is such as Facebook, Twitter, Bebo and so on. Nowadays, the youth in Malaysia is too attached with the new media when they rely so much and they can't even live without new media. Due to active usage of new media especially the social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Myspace and so on, the positive advantage has slowly turning into negative side effects of social media. One of the negative side effects of social networking sites is the issue of cyber racism among ethnics in Malaysia. This happens when the users or also known as the term 'netizen' misuse the usage of social networking sites which are supposed to have more positive effects rather than the negative ones.

Ethnicity is about contrasting religions, cultural faith and tradition, social classes and political beliefs, which all of them differ in terms of ethnic and national identities (Haryati, 2010). Nagata (1974) contended that 'ethnicity' should be given the meaning of situation according to a particular person's need (Haryati, 2010). In supporting her point, Nagata (1974) found that 'ethnicity' is flowing in multiethnic Malaysia. For example, like the wedding tradition by the Malay. The tradition is originally from the Hindu tradition and culture and basically not shared with the Muslims in Arab in Malaysia (Haryati, 2010). Ethnic relations can be defined as intercommunication among diverse ethnic group which is inter-ethnic and among the same ethnic group which is intra-ethnic. (Ramlee et al., n.d). It has been a problem to a plural society like Malaysia to integrate together as it is a big challenge for them. After some issues on ethnicity occur, the national integration among these ethnics is hard to conclude (Ramlee et al., n.d). Not only that, with the hardship of the national leader to integrate these races, with the new media existence, it will somehow affect the process of national integration among Malaysians. Malaysia is well known being a multiethnic and multicultural country; these various traits give trait to interethnic country (Haryati, 2010). However, these interethnic relationships that occur have

become one of the biggest challenges for any country which consist of plural society just like Malaysia (Haryati, 2010).

New media is also the essential force that stimulates the pattern of globalization in human society. The globalization pattern has led to the transformation of almost all aspects of human society (Guo, 2012). Nowadays, new media specifically the social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook are used as a tool for the citizen to express their opinions and feelings and not to forget to condemn other races too. For example, Alvin Tan and Vivian Lee insulting the Muslim during fasting month by their improper post on Facebook 'Selamat Berbuka Puasa dengan Bak Kut Teh. This, however, can trigger ethnic tension among the Malay and the Chinese people. The emergence of new media is not only dominating the form and content of information and messages, but it is also relating to two people understand each other by the process of human communication, notably people with different ethnic groups (Guo, 2012). The most interesting part of this is Malaysians are being expressive through media consumption and this suggests that Malaysians communicate more frequently through the media (Haryati, 2010). This situation will create tension among races and can lead to racial aggression. However, there are some specific Acts that has been used to control the Malaysia media from publishing, commenting and also reporting on very sensitive issues regarding race and religion matters (Haryati, 2010). The racial riots 13th May 1969 were a bad and bloody experience for the Malaysians. Malaysians would not want the incident to take place and create another history for the country. The wide usage of new media and the interdependency of netizen in Malaysia towards the new media has declined the sensitivity of the Internet users. Those who are directly or indirectly related with the spreading of racism issues on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and so forth should be responsible for their actions. These people are not thinking about the consequences that they might face later when problems occur.

Our people despite Malay, Chinese or Indian are so fragile anything that related closely to religion and practices. At times, the netizen in Malaysia is being irrational because they have high possibility to defend their own race even though the issue has got nothing to do with them. This can cause tension and distrust among the Chinese and the Malays. If the netizen are not aware with the danger of cyber racism, then they will fail to integrate and create a social and harmony relationship among them. If this bad situation is to continue, the Malaysians will not achieve consensus and they will be haunt with the dissatisfaction and fail to understand the true meaning of unity. According to Kemp (2012), the Malaysian Internet users who have access to social media sites are 90%. Malaysians are engrossed to surf the Internet than watching television. They spent twice as much time on their online activities. Other than that, 80% of the Internet users in Malaysia like to watch video streaming online and 51% have an active Youtube profile.

With the popularity of social media growing steadily in Malaysia, it is expected that one third of the country's Internet traffic is caused by social sites (Lalitha & Balakrishnan, 2013).

Problem Statement

In Malaysia, the new media has become one of the most important tool to communicate but at the same time can cause miscommunication as well. As Malaysia is growing as multiracial identity, the high level of tolerance is needed to sustain peace and harmony in the usage of new media especially when talking about people with different races and religions. The Malaysians need to instill high awareness in communicating do not do any action that can mislead the usage of new media. There is a big question mark regarding on the awareness of Malaysians especially the youth in communicating using the social media or to be specific the social networking sites. Despite from high tolerance needed, we also need to instill high sense of concern and sensitive towards other users. This is because without concern and sensitivity, Malaysians might not know how to respect other users by not hurting their feelings through the post that they post. Therefore, being in a multiethnic country, it is important to create a harmonious relationship among ethnics and also avoiding racial tension among races in the country.

However, the wide usage of new media or social networking sites is slowly creating chaos in our multiracial country. The people use new media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram to communicate with each other and not only that, the new media is also used to express their opinion and blast their unhealthy comments about other races as they want. If these actions are not being controlled, it will lead to racial conflict which constitute to racial aggression. In the vast technology and with the development of new technology nowadays, new media is considered as a must in our everyday life. People rely too much with the new media without knowing what exactly the purpose of using the new media is. Malaysians especially the younger generations use the new media as channel to spread information and also to receive information. However, with the advance technology, sometimes the information received is not well clarified because there are no trusted sources. That is why the Internet users need to know when and how to rely on the information they receive.

Social media is becoming a popular channel for Internet users to create network with others. With social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and so on to share opinions, to have discussion on certain issues and influence people's thoughts (Shahizan & Norshuhada, 2013). With the existence of multi races with multi religion in our country, the high tolerance among us is highly needed to avoid the 13th May racial riots again. Malaysians should know their responsibility in using the new media so that they will not jeopardize the relationship among the three main races in our country. This is to avoid misunderstanding and to sustain harmony and peace. In line with the concept of 1Malaysia, these three main races actually by now should work hand in hand to curb or lessen the race barrier among them. With this, the country, the old and the younger generations, with different race and religion background can accept each other easily without any hesitation.

Purpose of Study

As time goes by, our country is expanding and new technology comes into the picture. New technologies especially the new media is capturing the people's heart especially for the youth as it is always near to the youth. In today's world, with the steady in the era of globalization, together with the vast technology that is in good progress, the emergence of social media has changed the communication pattern of individuals (Abdul et al., 2014). The usage of social media in a multiethnic country is quite a challenge because not everyone will be responsible of what they are doing. The social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and so forth are the channel that they can communicate and expand their network but at the same time, if they misuse it, they might encourage dissatisfaction between users. The social media clearly is not used as the tool to condemn other races where it can create racial aggression among the ethnics in Malaysians.

With the fast changing technology that we have today, we can receive information from all sorts of sources as these days we are living in an interconnected world. The global media is changing variedly and together with the arrival of powerful media-driven culture somehow shapes the beliefs and values of a person especially the young people. The media can influence a person's decision making. At the same time, it is easily accessible to the people because with new media they have no limit in getting the information. New technologies offer people information which can be beneficial to the people to know but at the same time can bring effect to their lives not only young people but also people who has been using the technology for quite some time. In our country Malaysia, we have many ethnics and we need to respect other ethnics that practice different values and beliefs. After 57 years of independence, with the concept of 1Malaysia, we should together have the spirit to sustain the harmony in our country. Even though we are living in a multiethnic country but we are still able to accommodate each other. Our country Malaysia is developing the spirit of multiethnic community from time to time. Nowadays, most countries are moving towards mixture of ethnics from intermarriage, migration and local ethnic diversity which later on contribute to a plural society where as Malaysia is still going steady with the multiracial identity (Joseph et al., 2014). The relationship among three main ethnics in Malaysia is important to sustain harmony and peace in the country. These three main ethnic groups need to have high tolerance so that the good relationship can be maintained along the way. The purpose of this study is to determine the understanding of the youth especially for Malaysian youth on cyber racism problems that is related to interethnic relationships in Malaysia. At the same time, the purpose of this study is also to clarify the factors, perceived implications and also possible solutions of the cyber racism towards the interethnic relationship among netizen in Klang Valley.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to achieve the following research objective:

- i. To study the youth understanding of the danger of cyber racism issues on interethnic relationship
- ii. To observe the perceived implication of cyber racism issues among netizen
- iii. To identify the netizen’s opinion of the cyber racism issues solution on improving interethnic relationship among netizen

Operational Definition

Cyber Racism

Racism can be defined in many forms namely jokes or comments that can make someone feel offended, abusing someone through verbal like name-calling, disturbance towards other people or public commentary that can constitute to aggression towards other groups. Racism has few different directions as it mainly involves an ethnic, ‘racial’ religious or national identity, where they pointed their supremacy over others. At the same time, the term ‘racism’ can be targeted on active defamation on other groups or ethnics in terms of their ethnic and culture (Jakubowicz, 2012). On the other hand, when racism involves with online, therefore, it is known as cyber racism. Words, images and others which are significant to these, when portrayed in websites, blogs, social networking sites, videos or emails is known as cyber racism (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014). Based on some research, it is found by the researcher there are several actions that cyber racism can be measured in (i) Malaysian youth (ii) interethnic relationship (iii) netizen of new media users.

Malaysian Youth

In 2011, the Department of Statistics pointed out that 10.95 million or 42% of the 26 million citizens, in 2010, were among the youth. Youth is said to be the ultimate prime mover which is from the age of 15–40 for the development of the nation (Mahadzirah, 2014). In this country, Malaysia, the age of youth is defined for those who are between 15 and 40 years old and the youth expressed 41.5% of the whole population in 2005 (Faizah, 2007). In 2013, there were 13.74 million people or equals to 49% of total population of Malaysian citizen which is under category of youth. However, the age group of youth 20–24 makes up the majority number of youth in Malaysia (Asmah et al., 2016). Youth plays an important role in the expansion of our country in terms of politics, economy and social matters. Youth are the majority of the whole population in Malaysia. As according to the World Factbook, the dependency ration of youth is 35.2 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016). The percentage of Malaysian youth which has the age of 15–24 is 16.86%. (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016).

Interethnic Relationship

In Malaysia, the society is split into different ethnic groups and the difference in ethnicity brings great impact towards the nation's building. Interethnic relationship reminds us back in the British colonization which is the 'divide and rule' policy that draws lines between these ethnic groups (Merkel & Aqeel, 2012). In Malaysia, it is a country where the citizen consists of groups with different religion and cultural background with their own belief. The problem with the citizen is when they stereotype other ethnics with their negative behavior towards other ethnics where it allows the unhealthy environment and can create aggression. (Fazilah et al., n.d). In Malaysia, the concept of 'culture' or 'many cultures' bring the same definition as racial identity or 'ethnic pluralism'. In 2016, it is found that the composition of the three groups is 50.4% for Malay, 23.7% of Chinese and 7.1% of the Indians (Noraini & Chan, 2013). It is said that now Malay is the largest ethnic group in Malaysia which make up more than 50% of the population. In Malaysia, the term 'Malay' is when someone practices Islam and Malay traditions, speaks Malay language and their ancestors are also Malay. In our country, the Malay people are known as the ethnic group has who has tender manners and rich in heritage. On the other hand, the Chinese is the second largest ethnic group where they make up 25% of the population. Chinese practice different language which are Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin. In Malaysia, people always relate that the Chinese are enthusiastic in doing business. Other than that, the Indians have made up 10% of the population in Malaysia and they are the smallest ethnic group. Indians have variety yet colorful culture to be learned by Malaysians (Tourism Malaysia, 2017).

Netizen of New Media Users

Little more than two hundred years after the French Revolution, which is in the early 1990s, a new form of citizenship came into the picture. This type of citizenship is not bound to nation state or nation but that has the capability to join making decisions for the one that govern the society. The citizenship that originated on the Internet and it was given the title 'netizenship'. These people who practice this type of citizenship is called as netizens. At the very beginning, 'netizen' is an individual who involves in the matters of governing and make their stand about the Internet and how the Internet can have affect towards the society. However, there is a further expansion of the concept which is the one who is allowed to have an impact on politics, journalism, culture and other aspects (Ronda, 2014). Based on the research done, 40 percent of Malaysian netizen is revealed to spend more than three hours daily on the Internet. In addition, Malaysian netizen gave good feedback towards business advertising by clicking on to the advertisement banner. On top of that, not to forget that 35% of Malaysian netizen are active in blogging and they spend their time updating their blogs (Zeitgiest Marketing, 2006).

Perceived Implication of Cyber Racism

There are perceived implication that can be discovered from cyber racism. With the existence of new media, the cyber racism issues have bigger possibility to spread and to trigger racial aggression. This is a growing problem for the Malaysians especially to the youth. Cyber racism is slowly jeopardizing the harmonious interethnic relationship among the three main ethnics. At times, people do not realize that their actions may lead to cyber racism issues to happen. This can slowly diminish the bonding that is created among these three main ethnics. As far as it is concern, new media is supposed to be a medium for the Internet users to voice out their opinion in a proper and wise approach. Based on some research by the researcher, there are several perceived implication that will measure such as (i) erode the strong interethnic bonding (ii) bring threat to Malaysia’s national security (iii) increase the communication gap.

Erode the Strong Interethnic Bonding

The implication of cyber racism towards netizen is abolished strong interethnic bonding among these three main ethnics. The harmony and well to do interethnic relation that has been build long time ago is decreasing from time to time especially when the new media is taking place in our daily activities. High level of tolerance among these three main ethnics in Malaysia was once overwhelming and something that we should be proud of. However, with the racism that happen in our real life is now getting worse when it appears online. For example, the case of Wee Meng Chee who also known as Namewee and his video that was uploaded to Youtube called ‘*Negarakuku*’, creating a story about his overboard thoughts and opinions on our state and national policy which later created tension in our interethnic relation especially to the Malays (Haryati, 2010). This issue sparked rage and discontent among ethnics in Malaysia when people start to generalize Chinese are all the same. Therefore, due to that, the bonding among ethnics starts to erode and continue to erode if this matter is not being put into any actions.

Bring Threat to Malaysia’s National Security

Nowadays, with the infinite usage of new media in Malaysia, it is no longer surprising for our country to be involved in cyber racism issues. The users of the Internet, despite any range of age are starting to use the Internet for their own personal yet emotional purpose. For example, before this Facebook was used more to get connected with new and old friends but now the shifting of purpose is towards picking a fight and spark racism contents online. Racist materials such as images, videos, songs are posted online by irresponsible user of the new media and these materials will cause discomfort or maybe resentment to certain ethnic group. To certain extent, when this issue is continued by irresponsible user, the discomfort and resentment will contribute

to terrorism. Terrorism is a main concern relating to our country's national security (Brianna & David, 2013). The problem is now Internet or the new media is giving chances to people or the netizen to post anything they like without realizing the consequences that might occur later to the national security. The anonymity of the new media has open ways for terrorism to happen in our country. The national security is the determinant of the economic well being (Khairul Anuar et al., 2015). Without strong and stable national security, our country will be in the picture of exposed to unwanted threats.

Increase the Communication Gap

The outstanding development of the Internet has guided us to know the upbeat and downbeat of the people's choice as communication medium. The Internet contributes a lot in human communication but it also jeopardizes human relation with the advance advantage that the Internet has. As time goes by, the users are being too bold in communicating with each other on the Internet. The sense of respect is no longer important to some of the users and they lost their etiquette in using the medium. Moreover, with the multiethnic netizen that goes online in Malaysia, it can elicit misunderstanding thus increase the communication gap among ethnics. For example, posting racist images and captions about other ethnics related to their belief, religion or even tradition. This can somehow create gap among involved ethnics as the people who post the racist materials construct communication gap among ethnics. In this case, just because of one person, then the other race will start making conclusions about the other ethnics and this will create communication gap. Our great development of information technology is heading fast day by day. The Internet users will easily getting involved and influenced with what they obtain on the Internet; this can provoke hatred and ethnic tension and thus enhancing communication gap (Khairul Anuar et al., 2015).

Netizen's Opinion on Solutions to Cyber Racism

Cyber racism issues have evolved the interethnic relationship pattern among the three main ethnics in our country. Too much freedom on the Internet especially the social networking sites will cause cyber racism issues to happen. However, the researcher found that there are possible solutions to solve cyber racism issues in our country. Even though our country's cyber racism issues are claimed to be at peak, it still not too late for each and everyone in the country to curb the issue. Based on research that have been done by the researcher, there are several opinion on solutions to cyber racism that will measure such as (i) harmonizing national laws (ii) improving investigate method (iii) increase support among nations.

Harmonizing National Laws

The fast yet swift Internet coverage is widely used in Malaysia because the netizen are nowadays heading towards being an active user of the Net. In this country, it is difficult to determine the actual reason of the users being so overly attached with the access to the Internet. With the wide and easy accessibility of the Internet, the netizen are more exposed to get their selves involve in negative activity online especially related to national integration. The abuse of using the Internet can direct a person or a netizen to act violently and abusively online without taking into account about other ethnic. The responsible bodies have actually adopted the cybercrime laws so that perpetrators will be crooked for their irresponsible act that might affect the pleasant interethnic relationship in Malaysia (Stein, 2008). This is the reason why the national laws should be harmonized.

Improving Investigate Method

The government need to plan to improve the investigation procedure held to solve the cyber racism issues. This is because the issues are slowly bugging the good relationship that we have among ethnics in Malaysia. The anonymity in the Internet has somehow experiencing difficulties to the government to trace the perpetrator that should be responsible of his or her wrongdoings. Many of cyber racism issues are not being solved and the reckless and immature user are still out there creating more and more cyber racism issues that can instill disgust among different ethnics. For example, Alvin Tan still produces videos related to ethnics or to be specific religion even though he is not in Malaysia. Based on the research that has been found by the researcher, Malaysia already has plenty law regarding cyber crime but it is a high time for the government officials to really look into cyber racism matters and review the existing legislation so that it can help in reducing cyber racism issues in Malaysia (Malaysiakini, 2016).

4.2 The Understanding of Malaysian Youth Towards the Danger of ‘Cyber Racism’ on Interethnic Relationship

Cyber Racism

According to Urban Dictionary, cyber racism is a form of racism happen online (Urban Dictionary, 2015). Cyber racism is usually brings the definition of racism which developed in the cyber world. The cyber racism through the Internet includes racist websites, images, blogs, videos and comments from any of the social networking sites as well as racist comments, images or language in text messages,

emails or on social networking sites. The term of racism on the internet is familiar, repeatedly used and is assisted by the anonymity which is offered by the internet. Racism can be spread in any form be it racist blogs, photos, videos, comments and others on social media (Marianna et al., 2016). It is said that any material which are being published that cause rudeness to other races, color or national ethnic has the same implications towards the offline activities. Later, cyber racism can lead to racial aggression or cyber bullying. The example of cyber racism in Malaysia is from the Low Yat incident where rumors showed up in social media telling that how the Chinese cheat the Malay man by selling counterfeit phone.

Interethnic Relationship in Malaysia

Our country Malaysia is a multiethnic country and social integration among these three major ethnics which are Malay, Chinese and Indian are been taken seriously as it affect the harmony relationship among these three major ethnics. However, the ethnic assimilation has been a big question mark whether it can be achieved or not since independence as the conflicts occur reflects the no ending disintegration among these three ethnics. The new media is one of the medium that has been widely used to communicate with one another. The new media is influencing the communication pattern among these ethnics or also known as netizen. Social networks, social integration and social capital are three concepts that have accumulated different meanings and explanations. Relationships among people in a social group begin when individuals or groups make a connection with others in or out of their own companies. By making linkages through a series of networks, people tend to share a common value with other members in these net-systems. Network chains integrate different people with different abilities and resources.

Based on the research that have been done, the Malay has 63.0 percent of the population where as the Chinese has 25.0 percent population and the rest population filled by the Indians and other ethnic groups. Each ethnic group is defensive of its own rights and these own rights will create social border. Later, the social border can constitute to racial tension and conflicts (Ramlee et al., n.d). The good relationship that was achieved by these three main ethnics did not go through an easy path. Our ancestors had given their best effort to gather different ethnics together even though they face challenges to handle the situation. Therefore, the new generation needs to uphold and maintain the joyful and pleasant relation among the ethnics in Malaysia especially the three main ethnics. As Malaysians, we are supposed to practice gentle and welcoming kind of attitude although we come from variety of ethnics. It is important to have high respect towards the plural society and avoiding from being too sensitive and selfish especially when it comes to matters related to religion and culture.

Malaysian Youth

Based on the Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics 2010 which is collected by Population and Housing Census of Malaysia, it is estimated 5.115 million youths in Malaysia (Chuin et al., 2013). Based on research done by other researcher, the youth are among the younger generations or also recognized as Millennial generation with age range 18–29 (Farah Dina & Melati, 2013). Based on Statistics from Department of Statistical Malaysia shows that there were 27.7 million people in 2008 and 11.26 million people are from the youth group (Dzuhailmi et al., 2012). These group of youth have dynamic, innovative and creative way of thinking and these people should been given the chance to express their capability in contributing into the progress of country’s development. Youth are important for the country because they are the one who empowering the evolution of Malaysia’s well being. In Malaysia, the age range for youth is from 15 until 40 years old (Faizah, 2007). The youth should realize that they are the asset of the country and without them; the country may not be able to accomplish the aim of the policies that have been done.

Cyber Racism Issues on Interethnic Relationship in Malaysia

Malaysia is a unique country consists of unique citizen that comes from different ethnics. Each individual be it from any of the ethnic, each of them possess distinctive tradition, belief, language, religion and so forth (Somayeh Mortazavi., 2015). Interethnic relationship can develop either online or offline. The interethnic relationship is recognized as a serious matter and it need to be taken care of. Nowadays, people prefer to utilize the social media to be specific the social networking sites to get connected with other ethnics. Technologies have captured the needs and wants of the people to reach the outside world other than using face-to-face communication (Somayeh Mortazavi., 2015). Through the social media, they learn about other race’s culture and tradition. However, the negative side is when they shift the positive side of social networking sites to negative one. The social media can be the best medium to stay connected and widen the network but it can also be the worst medium because it gets the users to be tangled with cyber racism issues.

The social media has become a trend especially to the youth due to its limitless accessibility. Unlike the traditional media, it is more limited and restricted than the new media where the traditional media is depend on whether it is from the government or the opposition side. In new media, the users have more opportunity to convey their thoughts and point of view. Based on the past research that has been done, the statistics specified that 15.6 million over 19.2 million of the netizen in our country are active on Facebook and 64 percent of the population have social media penetration. Therefore, the social interaction among ethnic is positive through the usage of social networking sites (Somayeh Mortazavi., 2015). The massive information sometimes exaggerates the actual information and confused the users. The continuation of unhealthy and dangerous social interaction between ethnics will result to hostility

(Rahmat, 2010). Dissatisfaction felt by certain individuals towards other ethnics is conveyed through new media particularly social networking sites as they actively posting comments, images, videos, songs or any clip arts which may insult other races with their racist materials. Later, these materials can cause anger to related ethnics even though sometimes the post is not for them but as long as it touches on the sensitivity of their race, then they will tend to defend. All in all this will exposed to racial tension that might even lead to bigger problems.

Danger of Cyber Racism

Most of the people nowadays do not realize the bad effects from cyber racism. The danger of cyber racism can get worse from time to time and day by day. There are so many policies that have been made by the government to strengthen the knowledge that Malaysians have regarding on new media. New media or social media is used to spread racist materials and also to trigger ethnic tension between ethnics. With the rapid development of technologies, people are no longer having ethics in utilizing new media. They have to be certain that living together in multiethnic environment need high level of tolerance. Most of Malaysians they do have sense of tolerance but they still do not instill the sense of acceptance on other ethnics. During our ancestors' time, they put so many efforts not only to create harmony among ethnics but also to maintain the harmony in other ethnics especially after the independence. The racism that takes places online is at peak where the users are irrationally and immature posting comments that can captivate to influence other users to be part of the cyber racism activity.

Based on other research, the issue pertaining cyber racism is not only happening in Malaysia but also to other countries like Europe and America due to the rapid growth and extension of social media (Jakubowicz, 2012). The cyber racism issues happen so frequent in the Internet because of the trouble-free access that makes the users access anytime and anywhere they want. Nowadays, it is not needed anymore for them to go to the cyber café when they have their own gadgets with sufficient data. For example, they can surf the Net with just RM1 in their gadgets or smart phones. Cyber racism can always happen due to quick flow of information regardless of whether the information is trustable or not. The users are more vigorous to spread the information they get from the Internet before checking on the source of the information. This can cause confusion to the users. For example, the Low Yat incident where we can see there are so many versions of stories that has the purpose to manipulate the information and try to create hostile between the two races (Gabriel, 2004). According to Business Insider, the users only read things online when they agree with those things and they talk to other people who have the common point of view with them. So, most of the times they will be very obsessed with their own point of view through online and whoever has different sets of thoughts, they will easily create fight by insulting people who has different point of view than them. For example, Malay people are giving harsh comments due to the case of a Chinese guy honk his car during Friday

prayers. Without tolerance and understanding, the three main ethnics will not achieve long lasting and content relationship. (Tony, 2012).

Perceived Implication of Cyber Racism Among Netizen

The Effect of Cyber Racism Towards Youth

Youth are the group that has an active usage of the Internet. This is because youth are more interested to interactive materials rather than the traditional materials. Youth are well versed in using the new media because the new media is like ‘food’ to them as they frequently use the Internet in their everyday life. Based on a research, technology or the Internet is an intimate in the younger generation’s life. The Internet is seen as a reliable source for them to refer other than the traditional media. Youth are so much engrossed with what Internet has to offer and with that they do not realize or bother on the consequences that they need to face for their actions (.Jaishankar & Ronel, 2013).

Based on recent research, the general topic of an online conversation among youth is regarding race. Through online, youth are more exposed to matters pertaining race because the freedom that they have from the Internet has increase the eagerness in exploring more information about other ethnics online including creating racial tension online. Often we hear racism cases happen the offline conversation, however, it is not a surprise anymore when racism issues take place online. In long term effect, youth are perceived to face stress and depress resulting from the racism issues happen online (Brendesha et al., 2008). Social networking sites or SNS are the popular medium that youth use to spread racism materials. Activities such as posting comments, images, videos, articles, songs or any related materials that can trigger uneasy feelings among readers especially for different ethnics. Other than that, forming pages like ‘Page *Melayu Hebat*’ or ‘Page *India Jahat*’ can strike racism issues. The other implication of cyber racism towards youth is increasing the level of obsession of one own ethnic. Youth is an important asset to the country, therefore if the youth has already inculcate obsession of own ethnic within their selves, then it will be difficult to instill the importance of a tolerance and acceptance among other ethnics.

Encourage Cyber Terrorism

The new media can either be a savior in connecting people and can also be a disturbance to a relationship. It is the same as our interethnic relationship in Malaysia. Responsible and respectful user uses the Internet in a wise way to widen their network as well as exchanging ideas among other communities. However, there are also group of people especially the group that is exposed to the new media every day, the youth, they purposely use the Internet to bash other people online. The reason they do such

things is because online communication is not as restricted as the offline communication. At times, the hardcore 'keyboard warrior' can turn to be anonymous user on the Internet and start creating chaos online. At first, racism that takes place online is not as worrying as it can be but as later, in line with the advance technology of the new media together with outstanding and vocal Internet users, cyber racism issues can turn out to encourage cyber terrorism.

Based on the research, cyber terrorism has becoming a threat to the national security. The term cyber terrorism however has no specific definition but according to past research, cyber terrorism is a combination between cyberspace and terrorism. Based on past research, the definition of cyber terrorism came in by Barry Collin in 1997 where he gave the definition of cyber terrorism as convergence of cybernetics and terrorism (Zahri, 2009). Along with that cyber terrorism can be addressed as illegal attacks and threatening to attack computers, networks and information with the purpose of frightening the government or the people for either political or social matters. If we were to consider again the main reason a netizen is involved with cyber terrorism is when they first have extreme cyber racism issues that will lead to bigger issue which is cyber terrorism. The people need guidance to handle the new media because without guidance and any legislation, the problem will continue to haunt Malaysians. The key point is each and every one of the Internet user need to practice ethical values whether in real life or even online to avoid cyber terrorism from happening (Nazurah & Tehrani, 2012).

Creates Division in Society

The uniqueness of Malaysia is tremendous. Malaysia is unique because it is a country which consists of people who has different ethnics and religions. The capability and willingness of Malaysians to live together with other ethnics is something that we need to be proud of. The high and sufficient level of tolerance and acceptance is needed to ensure stability in the society. Moreover, although we are living in a society with variety of ethnics, race and religion, we still practice to learn to appreciate one another without any prejudice. However, with the emergence of new media, people are slowly relying on new media to obtain information as well as disseminating information. The shifting of preference from traditional media to new media can be seen clearly especially to the youth. New media is not recognized as new anymore as it establishes many opportunity for the users to widen their network. For example, Facebook is used to connect with new friends, long lost friends and also existing friends. Unfortunately, the extension of the Internet has becoming 'wild' when the users misuse the Internet for some other negative purposes. Due to lack of sensitivity, the users make full use of the new media or the social networking sites to manipulate certain information.

Worst, when this happens to different ethnics in our country that can be relate with cyber racism. The problem with the Internet users now is they do not maintain the decent manners to use the new media and most of the times they act according to their emotional feelings. This plural society has the number of 23.27 million in 2000

comprises of Malay and other indigenous group that make up 65.1 percent of the population of the country; the Chinese that make up 26.1 percent and the Indians 7.7 percent which make them the third largest group in our country's population. (Lim, 2012). The spirit of multiculturalism and multiracial in the heart of each and every individual need to be accumulate to enhance the national spirit especially among these three main ethnics. Nevertheless, if cyber racism issues still cannot be reduced, then it might affect the society where it creates division among ethnics.

Increase Prejudice and Negative Stereotype

In Article 11 of the Constitution, it highlights the freedom for all religions to be practiced by all ethnic groups even though Islam is the official religion according to Article 3 (1). Moreover, in Malaysia, everyone regardless of any race or religion needs to respect other people's stand and belief without any prejudice. (Haque, 2003). Based on past research, the definition of prejudice is a hatred based on defective and firm generalization. Moreover, based on past research, prejudice can be defined as prejudgment action where it causes people to judge irrationally and having bad impression on other races (Alam, 2013). For example, someone is making a statement as 'Malay can be a good worker provided that he or she is not lazy'. On the other hand, the definition of stereotype is referring to common thoughts that come to our mind about any particular group. For example, the stereotyping of '*Melayu malas*' or '*Cina penipu*' or even '*India jahat*'. Stereotypes are divided into positive stereotypes and negative stereotypes. Stereotypes exist since the colonial era where it has roots in our country's history. The British has already given the demographic to each and every race namely Malay, Chinese and the Indian such as the Malay will work in the farm, Chinese will do business and work in tin mining and Indians will work at the estate. In the twenty-first century, the stereotype of these three main ethnics has extended to different levels of stereotyping. With the enormous existence of new media, the Internet user use the medium to make statement that is considered as stereotyping other ethnics. Based on past research, the definition of stereotype is a permanent thought or image that most of the people have towards specific person or group. However, the thought is incorrect in real life. On certain extend, if this matter is not being controlled, then it could lead to ethnocentrism. On the other hand, stereotyping is when people make judgments about other people based on their own experiences (Kamilah et al., 2016). We as Malaysians need to live to avoid prejudice and stereotyping as long as we are staying together sharing the common name as 'Malaysians'.

Cyber Racism on the Interethnic Relationship

The Individual Responsibility of Sustaining Peace in Interethnic Relationship

During the British era, the approach of 'divide and rule' was practiced. In 1957, as the independence approached, the Malay, Chinese and the Indian began to emerge. The government came out with so many efforts to gather all the three races together. It needs a lot of effort to strengthen the relationship between ethnics in Malaysia and to achieve the understanding among us. In our country, we are based on the 1971 National Culture Policy which is in accordance of three major concepts that are Malay culture is the proper culture suitable elements from the other cultures may be accepted as part of the national culture and Islam is an important component in the molding of the National Culture. Malaysians respect other ethnic's trust and belief like Malay people celebrates Hari Raya, the Chinese celebrate Chinese New Year and the Indians celebrate Deepavali. Regardless of any race and skin color, we should appreciate the colorful culture of variety of ethnics in our country without any prejudice and discrimination. The issue of cyber racism in Malaysia can be reduced provided that it all starts with the individual themselves.

The Internet user or the netizen have to be responsible enough to use the new media be it social networking like Facebook, Twitter or even Instagram or any other channels. However, the interactive and transparent features offered by the Internet is limitless and that makes the users feel free to write and to post anything that they like including materials related with other races. The freedom to express through new media is undeniable making the users to forget the consequences that they might face if they misuse the new media. The researcher finds that being responsible alone is not enough, therefore the user needs to do extra job which is to cooperate with Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Malaysia (MCMC) whenever they see racist materials being uploaded by any individual and penalty or heavy punishment will be made to the offender. They are encouraged screen shot the post before lodging the report to the responsible bodies. By this, it may help to reduce the cyber racism issues among Malaysians.

The Society Responsibility of Sustaining Peace in Interethnic Relationship

We as Malaysian never have the clear picture and having the thought of 'lesson learnt' from the racial riots 13th May 1969 and Kampung Medan incident. These two incidents happen involve the three main largest ethnic in our country. With the realization of New Economic Policy (NEP), the society do not came across the idea of getting all ethnic together. In fact, the ethnics are complaining that the government is being bias towards certain ethnics. This policy has been adopted in 1971 after the bloody incident of 13th May 1969. According to Dr Chandra Muzaffar, the Chairman

of Yayasan 1Malaysia Board of Trustees claimed that ethnicity issue is saturating into Malaysians (Hariati, 2014). Clearly, peace needs to emerge organically from within society, addressing the multiple concerns and aspirations of different sectors, and seeking common ground so that all sectors feel invested in strategies, policies and mechanisms that offer the way forward. Civil society has a critical role to play. After the implementation of Vision 2020 and later Transformasi 2050, which has the initiative to strengthen the unity among society and the society should have more awareness towards the importance of national integration.

The Internet is a helpful medium to bring these three ethnics together but nowadays it seems impossible to do that due to the maltreatment of Internet usage. The new media is vitally important but it is used by the Internet users as vehicle of harsh and insulting expressions towards other races especially the new generation. For example, Na Mee Wee, a Johorean blogger provokes racial aggression where he produced a video called ‘*Negarakuku*’. This irrational and disrespectful video can construct hatred among ethnics and if worst can lead to another racial riot. The government has come up with countless beneficial programs with the purpose to brace up nationality rather than highlighting ‘which race do you come from’. There are many self regulatory programs organized by the governments to promote the curbing of cyber racism issues. The society, mainly these three main ethnics should not only have awareness as it will not have any effect on certain individuals. In conclusion, besides having awareness, the society also need to have awareness and at the same time having high responsibility to use the new media in an ethical way.

The Government Responsibility in Sustaining Peace in Interethnic Relationship

The rapid rise of the new information and communication technologies has implications for conflict and peace that are only beginning to be grappled with and which offer possibilities to broaden inclusion around peace building. The new media is more ideal by the netizen because they have wider scope of information unlike the mainstream media which is likely to be said to be prohibited by the government. Due to rigid and strictness of providing information to the public, people chose to go for alternative media. At the same time, this also applies to cyber racism issues. The freedom to write and to express is more than the mainstream media, perhaps more transparent than the mainstream media. There are more than 200 million blogs, 120 million YouTube videos and 500 million Facebook users worldwide. Based on past research, there are 17 million Internet users and almost two thirds of the Internet users are in the range age of 21–40 (Murphy, 2013). The new social media can be harnessed to draw people together, to foster inter-group dialogue, to promote conflict management and resolution and to create the public will to change attitudes and behavior.

Based on past research, National Security and Sedition Act 1948 are used to curb the too much freedom of expression in Malaysia. On top of that, cyber crime is being

curbed by Digital Signature Act 1997, Computer Crime Act 1997 and Commission and Multimedia Act 1998 (Shao, 2013). Later, Content Code came into the picture where it reveals an obligation towards self regulation. This Code particularly promotes growth of the communication and multimedia industry and also to protect the end user (Communications & Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia, 2008). This includes plan against bad language, false content, violence and obscenities, crime- or conflict-inducing suppositions, as well as negative portrayals of women, children, family values, culture, race and religion in media, broadcasting and advertising also in online media (Rex, 2013). As outlined in Sect. 4.4, any person commit to a seditious act, utters seditious words, publishes, possesses, prints, distributes, imports or sells such materials, to fines and imprisonment of up to three years, with sentences of five years for repeat offenders (Peter, 2013). For example, in 2013, Alvin Tan and Vivian Lee were charged with Seditious Act due to Ramadhan greeting with pork. However, it seems that the offender is not afraid of being charged. So, the government needs to come up with new solutions to restrain cyber racism issues from happening. The government needs to strengthen the National Security and Seditious Act 1948 with heavier punishments. Other than that, the government should implement new subject to primary and secondary school students related with national integration to infuse spirit of nationalism in their hearts and minds.

Theory Guiding the Study

There are related theories can be used in guiding this study. The theory that has been used in order to complete this research is uses and gratification theory and dependency theory as well as conflict theory. These theories are suitable to discuss on the understanding of Malaysian youth towards the danger of 'cyber racism' on interethnic relationship among netizen in Klang Valley. The theory is explained as below.

Uses and Gratification Theory

Early in the history of communications research, an approach was developed to study the gratifications that attract and hold audiences to the kinds of media and the types of content that satisfy their social and psychological needs. Inversely, others see the Web as the ultimate in community building and enrichment, through which users can create relationships online in ways that have never been possible through traditional media. Facebook and Myspace are the two leading popular social networking among youth. Through these social networking sites, they can create their interactive own home page including videos, songs, photos to catch the attention of other followers online. Other than that, these sites are recognized as easy, reachable and transparent for them to communicate with other users (Mark et al., 2009).

According to uses and gratifications theory, media is used to as it leads to people's desires to communicate, the social environment, the mass media, communication activities and also the consequences of their actions (Mark et al., 2009). Moreover, Young (1996) raised concern that excessive use of new media such as the personal computer may leave users vulnerable to technological dependencies like 'Internet addiction' (Thomas, 2000). Currently, Uses and Gratification is considered to be an important method in analyzing and understanding trends in usage for internet-based media. This is largely due to how well a Web user's usage habits align with the expectations of Uses and Gratifications studies; specifically, Web users are actively pursuing gratification through the Internet (Nicholas, 2008).

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory holds that law and the mechanisms of its enforcement are used by dominant groups in society to minimize threats to their interests posed by those whom they label as dangerous, especially minorities and the poor. Conflict theories draw attention to power differentials, such as class, gender and race conflict and contrast historically dominant ideologies. Second, internal conflicts often appear to be ethnic in nature. More than half of the civil conflicts recorded since the end of the Second World War have been classified as ethnic or religious. One criterion for a conflict to be classified as ethnic is that it involves a rebellion against the state on behalf of some ethnic group. Such conflicts involved 14% of the 709 ethnic groups categorized worldwide (Joan et al., 2012).

Ethnic conflict is by no means universal in ethnically heterogeneous societies: in many countries ethnic groups coexist peacefully. Nor is it constant over time: many ethnically heterogeneous societies experience long periods of fairly harmonious ethnic relations before or after periods of conflict. An implication of our conception of ethnicity as a boundary-enforcement device is that not all ethnic distinctions are equally effective ways of enforcing group membership. In particular, it is possible that some types of ethnic identities are harder to shed than others. One reason for this is that some ethnic identities are more easily observed by members of other groups. In Malaysia, the ethnic conflict occurs when there is misunderstanding or dispute that happens among them and the conflict goes on without any solution to those conflicts. The three major ethnics in Malaysia should together establish harmony and peace to secure more developed yet healthy environment in the country.

4.3 Methodology

The study used a qualitative research design. The research was conducted by in-depth interview. There were ten informants from Malay, Chinese and Indian. One female and one male was interviewed from each of these ethnics. This research is to study the danger of cyber racism towards interethnic relationship, the perceived implications

of cyber racism issues towards interethnic relationship and possible solutions on cyber racism issues.

A purposive sampling technique is used when collecting the data. A qualitative research is defined as field research as the research is carried out in the familiar environment where phenomenon occurs, rather than restricted laboratory settings (Oxford Journal, n.d). A qualitative research is related to interpretivist sociological tradition which is phenomenology, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism (Jennifer, 2002). An in-depth interview method was used for the study. The study was carried out by conducting nine interview questions regarding the understanding of these Malaysian youth towards cyber racism issues in Malaysia.

In this study, the researcher collects the data by conducting in-depth interview with the informants. The informants are going to be interviewed with interview questions related to the danger of cyber racism in interethnic relationship among netizen, perceived implications of cyber racism and possible solutions for cyber racism issues. The in-depth interview will be done through face-to-face interview. The in-depth interview is a technique designed to obtain a vibrant picture of the participant's point of view on the topic of the research (Family Health International, 2007). The distinguishing feature of ethnography, however, is that the researcher spends a significant amount of time in the field (Michael, 1997).

As for this study, the in-depth interview will be conducted with the informants. In-depth interview is a mode of conversation which the researcher is going to discover the problem, new clues, complex and accurate information based on the informants' experiences (Oxford Journal, n.d). The interview questions were not rigid and the researcher can find variety of ways to collect the data from the informants. At the end of the interview, the aim is to collect all related and useful information on the questions asked during the interview with the informant. The in-depth interview was useful to gain more information about the understanding of the understanding of Malaysian youth towards the danger of 'cyber racism' on interethnic relationship among netizen. In order to accomplish this requirement, the researcher has chosen ten informants, a male and a female from three main ethnics in Malaysia which is Malay, Chinese and Indian. They were chosen because they have knowledge on the cyber racism, new media and they are the active users on social networking sites. At the same time, they have their own opinion on cyber racism issues that are related with the misuse of new media. The informants were aged 18–30 years old as the informants to answer the interview questions. The informants have different background in terms of education, profession, status and monthly income.

The interview questions are divided into three sections which are the introduction question, transaction question, key question and also closing question. In the introduction question section, the informants were asked basic questions on their background such as name, age, address and occupation. Next, in transaction questions section, the informants were asked on the basic question of the terms interethnic relationship, netizen and cyber racism. Moving on to the next section, the key questions were asked to the informants regarding understanding of the danger the understanding of the Malaysian youth towards the danger of cyber racism on interethnic relationship among netizen, the perceived implication on the danger of cyber racism

on interethnic relationship and possible solution on cyber racism issues on interethnic relationship. the key question is based on three research questions.

4.4 Finding and Discussion

Decrease Harmonious Relationship Among Three Main Ethnic

Cyber racism issues bring danger to the interethnic relationship in our country because it will decrease the harmonious relationship among ethnics. These issues will create more misconception and misunderstanding between these three main ethnics that will result to dissatisfaction. Later, from the feeling of dissatisfied, it will trigger to more serious condition which is hatred among these ethnics. The Internet user is exposed to cyber racism issues and they are likely to contribute to cyber racism issues if they are being ignorant and insensitive. Along with that, nowadays, the new media is frequently used by the youth and youth are the group that is rebellious and cunning. They use the new media to post comment, images, videos, songs and any related racist materials that can set off racial tension.

Before this, we are not even aware of this concept of cyber racism and what not but now with the emergence of social media we can see that it will affect the relationship between ethnic. People from different background, we might tend to express our own opinion without we realize that we might hurt some of our brothers and sisters from different races. So, I think cyber racism issues may affect our harmonious country. (F1)

So whatever happens on the Internet might or could affect the harmonious or well being of other interethnic relationship that has been build for 50 plus years since the independence of Malaysia. If this problem is not taken care of it could cause riots and also fights just like in history of 13th May 1969 or it could have been worse because it is like a time ticking bomb. (F2)

...' We all should be learning more towards understanding other races especially through online. It will also affect the harmonious relationship in our country but it depends on how you take it. Anything that we do online, people will generalize our race and not to be person who has done the mistake'. (F4)

...' Cyber racism is dangerous in current situation because now we at 2017 where most of communication are using internet and more technology. Every single words or sentence or images of racism can affect the harmonious between the interethnic relationships in a country'. (F5)

Increase Prejudice and Stereotype

Prejudice is prejudgment and cause people to have bad perceptions towards other races. Stereotype is people make their judgments based on their own experience. This applies to interaction among ethnics as they go online. The medium that they use to

post racist materials such as Facebook and Twitter is widely used to spread racism without considering about other people's feelings. Other than that, the Internet users do not bother about consequences that might face due to their actions online. Cyber racism issues actually increase prejudice and stereotype because Malaysians use the new media to make generalizations about other races according to the post that they see. It is unfair to make generalization towards the race as whole because it is the individual who create tension among ethnics and not the race.

We can see in social media especially and for example this one Indian he robbed this aunty, and when we walk away or alone during night, you see an Indian guy looking at you and you will automatically play the video you watch in social media and you will have the perception and stereotype la that all Indian are bad and gangster, which is not good. (F7)

Other races could just stereotype Chinese scammers or conman when it comes to buying gadgets or even buying whatever stuff which in result you create a big gap among ethnics. (F3)

That's the problem where we have the tendency to relate the race to someone the person did wrong to us. I have encountered other experiences as well. For example, Indians. The Indians robbed them, so from that point they start to be racist towards all Indians even on the Internet. The minute they say an Indian name, for example in your account, then they will relate to the problems that we face. You know, we generalize. (F6)

That particular person has lack of knowledge, then they kutuk Chinese or Malay by saying something like Melayu ni malas lah. I could have just bash that one person but in the end my race will believe me and they will generalize the Malays as malas the Malays will generalize the Indian. And there we actually set a boundary then we have no good relationship. (F8)

Influence of Ethnocentrism on Interethnic Relations

Ethnocentrism can be one of the main reasons for divisions among members with different ethnics, races and religion in a society. Ethnocentrism is the idea of superiority in one's personal ethnic group. It is a form of bias, where we tend to immediately judge another culture as 'bad' or 'wrong' based upon their actions, if their values are not aligned with our own beliefs. At times, the tendency of Malaysians to practice ethnocentrism is high. It is negative in a sense that this practice will increase the communication gap among other ethnics. The feeling of 'my race is better than yours' should be eliminated to reinforce our interethnic relationship and support towards 1Malaysia concept.

If we see someone who is fair, we will say that particular person is good looking or even better or nicer. This goes the same to race. they always think that my race is better than yours. that's the problem. (F4)

Last but not least, we always think our group of people are actually superior to another whereby we think that other race is not good or equal as us. They have the thought of we are greater than them. So these can be the effect of cyber racism. (F6)

Based on this finding, there are three sub-categories that have been divided by the researcher. The first one is decrease harmonious relationship among three ethnics.

The second one is increase prejudice and negative stereotype and the third one is influence of ethnocentrism in interethnic relations.

The first sub-category is decrease the harmonious relationship among three ethnics. From the interview session, all ten informants agreed that cyber racism will decrease the harmonious relationship among the three ethnics. The first informant mentioned that before new media came into the picture, the netizen are not aware of the term cyber racism. However, with the emergence of social media, it affects the interethnic relationship in our country. With new media, we use it to express our opinion but we do not realize that sometimes it might hurt our friends from different race be it Malay, Chinese or even Indian. The second informant stated that if cyber racism issues are not being curbed, then we might not live in peace. Whenever there is racism issues occur, we may have high tendency to fight. The third informant mentioned that cyber racism issues that happen online will affect the well being of interethnic relationship. If the problem is not being taken care then it might lead to racial riot just like 13th May 1969. On the other hand, the fourth informant highlighted that Internet users need to learn and understand about other races especially with the new media. All in all, she said that it all depends on us how we take the Internet. The fifth informant agreed that cyber racism is dangerous and can affect our country's harmonious relationship what more in 2017 everything is communicated through technology. Therefore, there is high possibility to invite cyber racism issue to happen. The sixth informant also mentioned that the three main ethnics need to have equal understanding but when the issues are taking place, somehow it will hatred, racism, belittling others and also provoking things that they should not provoke. So, definitely cyber racism issues can decrease the harmonious relationship among three main ethnics.

The second sub-category is increase prejudice and negative stereotype. From the interview session, the first, second, third, fourth and sixth informants have the same idea of cyber racism increase prejudice and negative stereotype. The first informant agreed that Malaysians are easily being prejudice and stereotype with other race. They like to label each ethnic such as the Malay people are being judged as lazy, Chinese people are conman and Indian are gangsters. These labels exist due to cyber racism activities that happened online. The second informant said that the Internet users tend to relate what they read online to their real life. People easily believe with what they read without knowing whether the source is reliable or the other way round. The third informant mentioned that we are creating big gaps among ethnics when we start to judge other races. There will be no good level of understanding if this thing continues to happen. The fourth informant Malaysians always like to generalize with their own experience. Whenever they had bad experience with an individual, for example, a Chinese, then they will start making statements that all Chinese are the same and the sixth informant said that when a person is lack of knowledge, they are liable to make judgments about other races. All in all, prejudice and negative stereotyping is conquering a person's heart and soul when they are too attached with the new media until they are involved in cyber racism activities.

The third sub-category is influence on ethnocentrism on interethnic relations. The first, second, fourth and sixth informant agreed that cyber racism will influence

ethnocentrism on interethnic relations. The first informant said the users always post statements that show our race is better than other races. That action will create racial tension among races. The second informant had the thought of statements such as ‘my race is so much better than yours’ that spread in the new media can elicit cyber racism issues to happen. The Internet users should know the right way to handle new media as if they know; the new media actually has a lot of advantages. The fourth informant mentioned on the feeling of somebody that has the idea that his or her race is better than somebody else. The influence of ethnocentrism to interethnic relations is the effect from cyber racism activities that happen in our everyday life. Last but not least, the sixth informant said that the feeling of superiority when compared to other races. These are the affect when cyber racism issues happened.

Perceived Implication of Cyber Racism Among Netizen

Perceived implication is divided into its theme and the main theme is perceived implication. Under the category perceived implication, has sub-category which is increase the crime cases, feel stress and demotivated and lead to alienation and decreased social participation in the groups that experience racism.

Increase Crime Rates

The cyber racism activities can trigger increment for crime rates. The netizen have the thought that the Internet has easier accessibility rather than the mainstream media. The netizen do not realize that their actions can cause collision between the three main ethnics. Recently, the interethnic relationship among the three ethnics is bearable and can still be control to racism issues but with the emerging of the new media, the cyber racism issues rise even more. Based on the informants’ in-depth interview answers, with the rise of cyber racism issues, the crime rates also will rise.

Cyber racism towards netizen is tht it will increase a lot of crime rates where social media might be blocked by the government and it will cause a lot of inconvenience. (F3)

So let say, kalau government, like I said earlier kalau diorang nak buat gatekeeping and all, the process might make an individual feels like they have no channel to express their dissatisfaction. So what happen is they go out and attack other race since they cannot do it online. It’s going to rise the crime rates. (F1)

Feel Stress and Demotivated

Race, religion, tradition, belief and so on, whatever that has got to do with an individual’s particular race, they will become sensitive and protective. In Malaysia, most of the times the Internet user likes to intervene and interrupt in other people’s problem or conflict. Sometimes, they do not even know the cause of the fights but they are

too quick to judge. Indirectly, they are dragging themselves to involve in that issue. Any individual who sees any comment or posts related to their race or any other sensitive issues. They will feel stress and demotivated. From the interview session, the informants agreed that feeling stress and demotivated is common if someone experience cyber racism issues.

so like when I experience racism myself, I feel stress because there is nothing that I can change to make them go away. (F2)

Actually cause people to feel uneasy on particular race, this will lead to cyber racism. (F4)

Lead to Alienation and Decreased Social Participation

The continuation from feeling stress and demotivated, it will continue further to lead to alienation and decreased in social participation. The victim of cyber racism will feel out casted and they will feel out of place. The informants commented that any person who experience cyber racism, they will feel that they just only want to be with their own race and ignore other races. This will increase the tendency of an individual to be far away from other ethnics. This situation will affect the close bonding between three main ethnics.

When humans know something is bad, when you know they had a negative point of view towards a group, they might not participate in the social activity or even talking to someone which will lead to alienation of particular race on the Internet. (F8)

Another one could be feeling out of place. When there are lots of comment about other race, the particular race might feel alienated and they are being far from the community. We will not have bond like we are supposed to have. That's it la. (F9)

From the conducted interviews, the increase crime rates are the effect of cyber racism issues. Crime cases are not rigid to murder case but also cyber crime. The increment of crime rates is tremendous due to unstoppable cyber racism activities that go online especially through social media. The F9 commented that tension that is created through online, the users will also apply it offline and therefore the crime case in our country will start to increase as with just one click, cyber crime can spread very fast. There are too many cyber racism activities happened, the government will block certain websites that believed to influence or confused the users. So, the users will feel dissatisfy when they cannot have the access to the Internet, therefore they will attack other races offline and the crime rates will increase. The F8 informant highlighted the same point as the F9. Whenever the user cannot get through the Internet, they will start to attack people or other races offline.

The second sub-category is feeling stress and demotivated. Based from the interview session, the informants agreed that cyber racism will result to feeling stress and demotivated. The informants mentioned when individual experience cyber racism, they will feel lonely and out of place. They feel annoyed and irritated when some races make fun of their race. The users have their own perception of other races and they sometimes do not realize that their post will inclined to make people unhappy or grieved. The other informant mentioned that whenever he experience racism online,

he will feel stress because there is nothing that he can do to stop other people to say bad things about his race and the fourth informant said that the effect of cyber racism actually make us feel uneasy to other race. This is the effect of cyber racism issues towards the interethnic relationship of these three main ethnics.

The third sub-category is lead to alienation and decreased in social participation. From the interview session, the informants agreed that cyber racism lead to alienation and decreased in social participation. The cooperation among these three ethnics is slowly decreasing when the netizen's mind is influenced with cyber racism. At times, if the cyber racism issues are getting serious, these three ethnics will have difficulties to work together and it is even harder for them to achieve one common ground. The other informant said that when we have negative perception towards a race or any race that have a negative feeling towards our race, it will result on the decrease participation as people will stay away or choose not to join any conversation between other races. The majority of informants said that the feeling of out of place when we are different from other people or even other people create distance with us just because they do not favor our race.

The Cyber Racism Issues Possible Solution on Improving Interethnic Relationship Among Netizen?

Netizen's opinion of the cyber racism issues possible solutions is divided into theme and the main theme is possible solution. Under the category possible solution, has sub-category which is speak out and report when we see any forms of cyber racism, conduct more cyber security programs and use the Internet as the source for us to learn the cultures and traditions of different races.

Make Fast Report Due to Any Forms of Cyber Racism Activities

Based from the answer from the informants, they commented on their opinion for the possible solutions to reduce cyber racism issues. They suggest that the netizen or the Internet user should make fast report due to any forms of cyber racism activities online. The netizen have to avoid them from adding fuel to the fire that somehow encourages other people to extend their hatred feeling towards other races. Therefore, the informants suggested that if the netizen experience racism activities, they have to lodge report to Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) so that they can block the particular user or any related racist blogs or forums. This will somehow help to reduce the cyber racism activities from happening.

Internet is very free medium to everyone express their thought but it should be filter like on Facebook, you can report any form of cyber racism. (F10)

Report on that particular person who involve in the cyber racism. Use tools to auto block any racism post or comment. (F2)

Strengthen the Existing Cyber Security Programs

The government organizes numerous cyber security programs for the citizen to highlight the importance of these programs. The importance of these programs is related to reducing the number of cyber racism issues happening throughout Malaysia. In addition, the informants do comment on the existing legislation and also programs that were implement and organized by the government is not reachable to some of us especially the youth. The government needs to know the right approach to capture the attention of Malaysians especially youth. In the development of social media usage, common talks, forums or even advertisement is no longer relevant and give impact to the Internet user. Therefore, the government and related bodies must have the effort to revise again the existing cyber security programs. On the other hand, the informant also suggests that heavier punishment should be executed to the cyber racism offenders.

... 'Kita perlukan satu kempen. Kempen kesedaran. Kempen kesedaran yang kita ada adalah banyak tapi kita perlu satu kempen kesedaran yang sangat berkesan dan efektif. Kita boleh ambil contoh seperti di Thailand. Mungkin kita dapat play balik video Yasmin Ahmad kerana unsur unity begitu banyak dan alangkah bagusnya kalau kita dapat praktikkan apa yang kita nampak. (F4)

... ' Peranan kerajaan, kerajaan boleh memperketat undang-undang yang sedia ada. Mungkin kita sudah ada undang-undang berkaitan tetapi mungkin ia longgar sampai orang rasa endah tidak endah. Jadi, kerajaan perlu berbuat sesuatu untuk curb masalah ini' (F6)

... ' We can also report to our government official if we see something threatening. For prevention of cyber racism issues, we can conduct more cyber safety programs which can increase the understanding of netizen'(F1)

I don't think so the talks are very effective. At the end of the day, it is the individual that decides. There should be amendment like when you post anything about other race then akan ada punishment where you cannot use the Internet for two years or like that. (F10)

Utilizing the Internet as Source to Learn the Culture and Traditions of Other Ethnic

Racism is an undeniable matter whenever it comes to plural society. As a multiculturalism and multiethnic country, it is difficult to satisfy each individual's wants and needs be it Malay, Chinese or even Indians. Based on the in-depth interview, the informant informed that cyber racism is happening in continuation from racism that happened offline. At times, it can also go the other way round. Supposedly, Malaysians have the awareness to appreciate the variety of cultures and traditions in our country as long as we are respecting differences among races. The growth and expansion of information technology should be used in a proper way, basically to explore more about other race's culture, belief, traditions and so forth. The usage of the Internet is wide. There are so many ways for us to learn about other cultures and traditions with just one click. Unfortunately, cyber racism happened due to irresponsible individual who trigger the issues and create hostility among ethnics.

...’ Kita kena gunakan Internet dengan cara yang baik. Kita jangan easily spread out anything, apa-apa pun kita guna untuk positive side like dapatkan knowledge atau tau pasal kaum yang lain’. (F2)

...’ We can use the Internet as a source to learn about other culture and traditions of other races. We can gain further knowledge that we do not know that probably no one tells us about it but there are Google and Wikipedia that could help us out in understanding different cultures in detail’. (F3)

...’ An individual should know their responsible in using the Internet. We need to know that Internet is where we use to get information. An individual is playing a key role for not provoking things. Media is like an entertainment so don’t be too emotional on it and need to be social responsible. You have to know you cannot post status that can provoke things that can create misconception and misjudgment’. (F6)

Thus, it is notable that all the informants agreed that the possible solution is by making fast report to any forms of cyber racism activities. The first informant stated that the responsibility must come from the individual first. They must not deny their responsibility to make a report when they see any forms of racism that happens online be it in any of the channels. The netizen need to cooperate to report to respected government officials and they need to know the wisest way to use the Internet. The second informant stated that the netizen do not take the action by adding fuel to the fire to any comments or sensitive posts related to other races. The netizen should put a stop by being ‘keyboard warrior’ and start making reports to MCMC so that MCMC can block or drawing penalty to the offender. In addition, the third informant said that the social media like Facebook is a channel where netizen use to express their feelings. Sometimes, the netizen exaggerate what they have written. The third informant said that the Internet is a free medium for the netizen to express whatever they feel. They need to filter their post especially through social media like Facebook. The fifth informant highlighted that specific tools should be used to auto block any racism post or comments.

The second sub-category is strengthening existing cyber security programs. According to the in-depth interview, the first, third and the sixth informants agreed that by strengthening existing cyber security programs would help in reducing cyber racism issues. The first informant pointed out that there should be more attractive awareness campaign that could catch the attention of the netizen of all ages especially the youth. There are a lot of existing awareness campaign but the government should strengthen and strategize again the awareness campaign so that it can benefit the netizen. The first informant also highlighted that it is the government’s responsibility to strengthen the rules and regulation of the existing ones. The third informant said that the government should conduct more cyber security programs for the netizen to educate as well as give more understanding about consequences and the penalties that they will get if they commit to the cyber racism issues. The sixth informant thinks that talks are no longer relevant to the netizen especially youth. The government should plan something interactive and innovative to attract the netizen especially the younger generation who makes up the country’s whole population.

The third sub-category is utilizing the Internet as source to learn the culture and tradition of other ethnic. Based from the in-depth interview, the second, third and

sixth informants agreed that the possible solution is by utilizing the Internet source to learn the culture and traditions of other ethnics. The second informant said that the Internet should be used by the netizen to gain knowledge about other race and their traditions. The Internet should be used in a positive way to help reduce cyber racism issues. The third informant said that the usage of Google and Wikipedia is one of the ways for the netizen to learn about other culture and tradition of other races. The information is limitless if we use the Internet wisely. The sixth informant discussed that the netizen should not be too emotional on whatever they see online. They need not provoke things to become serious and trigger to racial tension. The Internet is just an entertainment and an individual have to play their role in using it.

4.5 Discussion and Conclusion

Most of the informants think that cyber racism issues can bring danger to the interethnic relationship if this matter is not being handle well. As a multiethnic country, we are supposed to live harmoniously under one roof without creating or trigger racial tension among these three main races. Based on the researcher's observation, it can be concluded that the cyber racism issues that occur in the social media is slowly jeopardizing the good reputation among three main ethnics. During the interview, most of the informants said that language barrier can lead to cyber racism to happen. This is because the language used in social media might vary from each race and the understanding and acceptance also vary. Therefore, it is important for an individual especially the youth to use the Internet wisely so that the harmonious relationship can be maintained.

As referred to the second research objective which is to observe the perceived implication of cyber racism among netizen, the researcher found out that the cyber racism issues do affect the netizen. Despite of age, the Internet has been widely used by the Malaysians and it can be said that they rely on the Internet so much until they cannot actually live without Internet. The Internet has somehow played its role as a medium to be used by the netizen to spread and also to accept any kind of information including posts that relate to racist materials. By having so many other advantages such as easy to access and low cost, no doubt it has been the medium that Malaysians use to spread racial content. On the other hand, the informants add up that the Internet can create division in society as hatred are spread through posts in social media that is closely related to sensitive matters touches on race and religion. Therefore, each and every one of the user despite from any age or race, they need to know their responsibility in using the social media. In addition, when the cyber racism issues occur and when the issues cannot be controlled, it will invite the government officials to block certain websites that might consist racial materials. By this, the netizen will rebel and feel dissatisfied because they feel that the government restricts the medium that they have to express their opinions and ideas. Therefore, due to this, crime cases might increase. On top of that, any individual who are involved in cyber racism activities, they will feel stress and demotivated. For example, articles, images, clips

and so forth on social media that make fun of their race, belief, faith or even religion. The netizen should have more concern and sensitive towards other races who have different belief and faith.

The cyber racism issues has actually affect the interethnic relationship among netizen in Malaysia. This is because the netizen freely use the Internet as the medium to extend the cyber racism materials namely through social media and so forth. In the researcher point of view, if the cyber racism activities that happened through social media are not being controlled, then the netizen will experience the extreme division of society in Malaysia. This somehow changes the relationship among three main ethnics in Malaysia namely Malay, Chinese and Indian. Although these three main ethnics live together under one roof, but the researcher found out that the closeness of these three ethnics erode due to cyber racism issues that is happening nowadays. From the researcher's point of view, the cyber racism issues are slowly creating the communication gap that the netizen use to have in the social media. At times, the users of the Internet are being ignorant to interact with other people from different race, religion from their surrounding and unfortunately same goes to their online interaction through the Internet or social media. They even forget that the community of our country is large and each individual in a community comes from different background.

According to the third research objective which is the netizen's opinion on the cyber racism solution in improving interethnic relationship, the informants agree that there are possible solutions to these issues. The Internet is firstly should be used as a tool for the netizen to get to know other races well. For example, Facebook can be used to create community that have different race, religion to exchange opinions and also point of view. The users have to be wise and not being keyboard warrior to create tension among other races that go online. Based on the informants, most of them think that it is important for the users or netizen to understand the cultural diversity and as well as accepting other races faith and belief without prejudice and stereotype. They should also remove the belief of which ethnic is superior. This belief will enhance bigger communication gap and cause more misunderstanding among them. Based from the interview, the researcher found out that there are possible solutions towards the issues of cyber racism that happened in our country provided that the netizen know their limit in interacting through social media. Before the government acts, each individual regardless of their background should understand and accept the interethnic relationship in our country and they have to ensure that they will not contribute to any activities that will lead to cyber racism. Then, when Malaysians know their role and responsibility, it will be easier for the government to implement new programs or campaigns as well as maintaining or improving the existing campaign or programs for Malaysians.

Thus, it can be concluded that our country need to have responsible user of the Internet so that they will not mishandle the Internet itself. The user should know the information they are sending and receiving. The wide usage of the Internet can lead to misuse of the Internet by gaining and delivering materials that can create misconception or misperception of other people towards our posts. It is important for the user to know their responsibilities in using the Internet to avoid cyber racism

issues from happening in our country. It is undeniable that the cyber racism issues are at peak and if the cases of cyber racism are not being reduced, then it might affect the country's well being and growth of the economy. Therefore, this is why the cyber racism issues are seriously needed to be taken care of before it affects the relationship between each ethnic.

The researcher found out that the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission should be responsible in monitoring and taking actions on cyber racism issues that is haunting Malaysians nowadays. Without the restrictions from the responsible bodies, the users will destructively use the Internet without thinking about the real consequences that they will face later. On top of this, it might seriously affect the well being of our country's interethnic relationship altogether. On the other hand, this research can also be as guideline to improve the interethnic relationship as well as curbing the cyber racism issues from spreading widely through the Internet.

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Chapter 5

Technology, Emotion, and Circle: New Spirals in China



Bei Guo and Maggie Jiang

5.1 Introduction

As a classic theory of social communication, the “spiral of silence” has been widely tested in different contexts on various moral issues and methodologies (Ettinger et al., 2023; Glynn et al., 1997; Masullo et al., 2021; Sohn, 2022) since being proposed by Noelle-Neumann in 1974. It posits that individuals constantly monitor their opinion environment, such as mass media and interpersonal networks, because they fear being socially isolated (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Through observing the opinion environment, people grasp a sense of whether the majority shares their own opinion. If their opinions are in line with the majority position, they tend to speak out, but if their opinions are incongruent with the perceived majority, they remain silent. In the spiraling process, perceived majority opinions are more likely to be shared and become more dominant, while perceived minority opinions become increasingly silent over time (Matthes, 2015).

With the increasing popularity of social media as a platform for social interaction and engagement (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021), the online opinion environment has changed significantly. The virtual space offers new affordances for expression (Neubaum, 2022) that legitimize the retesting of established communication theories such as the spiral of silence. Moreover, the manifestations of the theory vary significantly across cultural contexts, such as collectivist versus individualistic societies. Therefore, it is essential to examine how these factors influence the dynamics of the spiral of silence and its evolution in contemporary online discourse.

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The rapid rise of the Internet age has transformed media use in China. With over 847 million netizens—mostly young, digitally native, and often from low-income backgrounds (CNNIC, 2019; Guo, 2005)—China’s online population reflects a unique intersection of demographic and cultural characteristics. These conditions foster an online culture where emotional expression, identity formation, and collective belonging are especially salient. While China’s collectivist culture (Herrmann-Pillath et al., 2020) reinforces social norms that prioritize group harmony, digital platforms simultaneously provide spaces for resistance, expression, and social experimentation (Waterloo et al., 2018).

In addition to the more familiar political or civic dimensions of public discourse, China’s social media also serves as a space where youth identity, emotional loyalty, and group alignment are intensely performed—particularly within fan communities, or fanquan (饭圈). These communities, structured around intense devotion to public figures or “idols,” function as emotionally charged echo chambers. They not only amplify collective sentiment but also suppress dissent through practices such as online shaming, mass reporting, and harassment (Negro, 2023). For instance, during public scandals involving figures like Kris Wu or Zhang Zhehan, early discourse was dominated by loyal fan defense, often silencing or discouraging critical commentary until broader sentiment began to shift.

Such examples underscore how emotional conformity, generational identity, and collectivist norms intersect in shaping new forms of the spiral of silence—where silencing is not just ideological but deeply emotional. In these online communities, emotional alignment becomes a sign of loyalty, and deviation from the dominant sentiment can trigger exclusion. This dynamic reveals how youth-driven digital spaces both reinforce and reconfigure the mechanisms of public silence, echoing the chapter’s central argument: that social media is not only transforming political discourse in China, but also popular culture and everyday digital expression through new spirals of emotional and social conformity.

By extending the spiral of silence framework to include fan spaces and youth culture, this chapter highlights the need to understand public silence as an evolving process shaped by technology, emotion, and cultural context. These digital spirals reflect both continuity and change in how opinions are formed, expressed, or withheld in today’s China.

5.2 Social Bots: A New Subject Leads to Silence

Social media networks today are dynamic environments where human users and social bots coexist. Social bots are applications that automatically produce content and interact with humans on social media, trying to emulate and possibly influence human behavior (Ferrara et al., 2016). According to Grimme et al. (2017) social bots are a superior group of bots that can include chatbots and spam bots. They fulfill five major features: (1) they are fully automated, or partly human-steered; (2) they can act autonomously; (3) they work in a goal orientated manner; (4) they can

utilize multiple modes of communication; (5) and they are used in online media (Grimme et al., 2017). These capabilities enable social bots to shape public opinion effectively, as they can rapidly disseminate information, create persuasive narratives, and engage with users in a way that influences their perceptions and behaviors. These capabilities enable social bots to manipulate public opinion (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016), as they can affect the formation and expression of public opinion, rapidly disseminate information (Cheng et al., 2020) and form public tendencies (Cai et al., 2023). Studies have shown that even if social robots account for less than 10% of social media users, they are enough to cause more than two-thirds of users to remain silent (Cheng et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2019). This phenomenon has profoundly changed the dynamic balance of the traditional public opinion field.

In the context of China's collectivist culture, individuals are often more inclined to suppress dissenting views and conform to majority opinions to maintain social harmony (Huang, 2005). This tendency creates a fertile ground for social bots to exert influence by amplifying prevailing narratives, disrupting the natural evolution of opinions, and fostering an illusion of consensus. When the prevailing opinion climate aligns with their objectives, social bots can rapidly disseminate majority opinions or trending narratives, making these opinions appear more widespread and acceptable (Ruffo et al., 2023). Conversely, in an environment where dissenting views dominate, goal-oriented social bots actively interfere with the perceived opinion climate among human users during the evolution of opinions (Cheng et al., 2022). By generating tons of content that support certain views, these bots distort the perceived opinion landscape and create a false sense of consensus (Ross et al., 2019), leading audiences to believe that certain opinions represent the majority. Moreover, the influence of social bots extends beyond mere opinion expression, they effectively change people's willingness to express their views. It is important to note that not everyone expresses their opinions publicly, and people's willingness to do so is shaped more by the opinions that are actively expressed than by those that remain unvoiced (Cheng et al., 2020). By cultivating an environment dominated by majority opinions, social bots contribute to a culture of silence among dissenters, pressuring individuals with opposing views to conform to the dominant narrative (Maréchal, 2016).

5.3 Emotional Spirals: A New Influence on Silence

Emotion is the inherent psychological characteristics of human beings (Anora, 2020). Emotion possesses social attributes. Scholars pointed out that emotional social sharing can fulfill fundamental social needs, such as social consistency and sense of belonging (Zhou et al., 2019). Additionally, emotions can be both learned and contagious (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021), influencing what we notice, what we learn, what we remember, and ultimately the kinds of judgments and decisions we make (Clore & Parrott, 2020). Users' emotional behaviors are often influenced by their level of engagement within their communities (Schreiner et al., 2021). Emotions might spread through different kinds of social networks in various contexts, such

as between people in frequent close contact such as families (Wheaton et al., 2021), during workplace interactions (Elfenbein, 2023) or in leadership situations (Clarkson et al., 2020). On social media, this process occurs even more rapidly and widely. The growing volume, velocity, and variety of social media platforms provide users with expansive opportunities to express their opinions and emotions freely. Content shared on social media platforms often conveys information about the author's emotional state, judgments, and intended emotional communication (Andalibi & Buss, 2020). The rapid spread of emotional expressions enables them to reach a broad audience almost instantly (Hurtado de Mendoza et al., 2010), then fostering emotional contagion. When one person shares their feelings, those emotions can influence one another and ripple through social networks across time and space (de las Heras-Pedrosa et al., 2020). As these emotions accumulate, they contribute to the formation of an emotional climate (Steinert, 2021)—an environment where specific sentiments become dominant. Similarly to the traditional spiral of silence, when the dominant emotional expression aligns with the majority opinion, individuals are more inclined to vocalize their feelings. Conversely, if dissenting emotions are perceived as being in the minority, individuals may choose to remain silent, individuals may opt to remain silent, leading to the emergence of an emotional spiral (Xu, 2018). However, different from the emotional spiral relies more on the infection and circular feedback of emotions, rather than the mentality and group pressure that traditional spiral of silence concerns.

The user structure of Chinese Internet users is predominantly comprised of students, younger individuals, and those from low-income backgrounds (Guo, 2015). This group is particularly active online, often expressing their opinions in a straightforward manner that does not require extensive interpretation (Li et al., 2023). Their opinions typically reflect immediate feelings and sentiments, making emotional expression a central component of their online interactions. Moreover, due to the anonymity and fragmentation of network information, netizens' posts and comments are more likely to be distorted or extreme (Guo, 2015). Such open and emotionally charged expression creates an environment where individuals are more likely to mirror or amplify the emotions they observe, thus media platforms such as Weibo and Wechat frequently serve as "dumping grounds" for negative social emotions (Jalonen, 2014). Moreover, prior research showed that humans have an instinctive negative bias, responding differentially to positive and negative stimuli. Negative events tend to elicit stronger and quicker emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses than neutral or positive events (Eben et al., 2020). This bias makes negative emotions more salient and easily recognized in online social interactions. As a result, negative emotions frequently dominate the emotional landscape on social media, where they are widely shared and amplified. Moderate and rational perspectives are frequently overwhelmed or silenced to avoid attacks of the impassioned public.

The spiral of emotions not only affects the individual's perceptions and behaviors (Brosch, 2021), but also shapes the atmosphere and direction of public opinion to a certain extent. Negative emotional expressions can easily incite social sentiment and trigger fierce online public interactions (Zou, 2020). When people encounter public events, this spiral of emotions creates an environment where emotion and rationality

often collide. The interplay between heightened emotions and logical reasoning can lead to polarized viewpoints (Clifford, 2019), as individuals become more entrenched in their positions. In this charged atmosphere, nuanced discussions may be overshadowed by sensationalized reactions, making it challenging to foster constructive dialogue. Moreover, the influence of social media amplifies this dynamic, allowing negative emotions to spread rapidly and widely. Platforms can become echo chambers (Nguyen, 2020) where outrage and fear dominate, further fueling the spiral. As individuals engage with emotionally charged content, their perceptions may skew toward more extreme interpretations of events, leading to a cycle of reinforcement that complicates consensus-building. Public opinion can become driven more by emotional appeals (Bleakley et al., 2015) than by actual events or evidence. Emotion and identity become the most important things in online interactions.

Negative emotions influence individuals' perceptions and behaviors in response to a problematic situation (Li et al., 2020). When these emotions manifest collectively, they possess a potent ability to motivate action and drive problem-solving efforts. This creates social pressure on corporations, influencers, and government bodies to respond effectively to the concerns being raised. In this context, when users engage with public events, they tend to prioritize emotional responses over factual analysis. This emotional emphasis stems from a belief that amplifying collective sentiment can lead to more effective solutions (Schweitzer & Garcia, 2010). As a result, emotions become the primary lens through which events are interpreted and addressed, significantly influencing the dynamics of online discourse. In China, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced, as emotional logic plays a critical role in shaping the trajectory of online public events (Guo, 2015). The atmosphere can become charged with intense feelings, often characterized by violent anger and populist tendencies. In the following part, a specific example analysis will be conducted to illustrate how these dynamics play out in practice.

Pangmao, a young man working as a game agent, tragically took his own life by jumping into a river after breaking up with his girlfriend, Tan. The incident quickly attracted widespread public attention. According to Pangmao's sister, during his relationship, he lived a very frugal life, renting a 1,000-yuan-per-month apartment and surviving on 10-yuan takeout meals, while spending an astonishing 500,000 yuan on his girlfriend over two years to sustain the relationship. She shared chat and transfer records between her brother and Tan on social media, accusing Tan of cheating money in the name of love. Her posts served as a catalyst for emotional responses and led to a wave of verbal attacks and abuse directed at Tan.

This incident sparked a strong emotional outburst from the public. On social media, Pangmao was portrayed as a sincere and selfless person who paid all for love, while Tan was painted as a greedy "love-liar" and was labeled a "gold digger." These portrayals stirred feelings of injustice and anger, which were further amplified by the mechanisms of emotion contagion within the online community. As anger is an important emotion that governs individuals' attitudes (Rico et al., 2020), the situation quickly escalated into an emotional spiral. The negative emotion of anger and grief became dominant in the emotional climate. In this emotionally charged atmosphere, individuals who might have had a more balanced view, or who could

have sympathized with Tan's perspective, likely chose to remain silent, worried that expressing such views could lead to isolation from the outraged public. This reaction illustrates the spiral of silence effect—once a dominant narrative takes hold, individuals are more likely to conform to it rather than dissent. The emotional spiral intensified as more users, seeing the collective anger, joined the conversation with the same negative emotions. This cycle of increasing emotional intensity made it difficult for cooler, more rational perspectives to break through, leading to a situation where Tan was judged more by emotion than by evidence.

Tan came forward to respond to the allegations, providing records of transfers with Fat Cat as evidence, showing that she had also transferred money to Fat Cat, not just unilaterally accepted. However, most netizens chose to ignore her statements. People, caught up in this emotional contagion, became less likely to critically assess the situation and more inclined to participate in the hostility. In this heated environment, emotions overshadowed rationality, leading to some extreme behaviors, including cyberbullying Tan. Amid this turmoil, anger and feelings of injustice strengthened, with discussions often veering into gender opposition. Many netizens voiced their outrage in comments under official accounts, calling for investigations and solutions. They mobilized collective sentiment to press for accountability. In this event, emotional spiral not only influenced individual reactions but also shaped collective demands for action.

This online emotional event ended in police involvement, who released a statement clarifying that Tan's actions did not constitute fraud. In a notable reversal, the public began to reevaluate the earlier accusations and condemnations. Individuals who had previously remained silent started to express their support for her, reflecting a reverse Spiral of Silence; as the majority view shifted, the fear of social isolation diminished, empowering previously quiet voices to emerge and enriching the discussion. However, while Tan was ultimately exonerated, the impact on her life was profound and lasting. This outcome cannot be reversed which can serve as a powerful reminder for netizens to be more mindful of the emotional spirals.

5.4 Circle: A New Interweaving with Silence

The concept of network circles, akin to the notion of community, first emerged in China in 2015. Network circles are defined as online aggregation spaces based on modern network technology, using platforms as carriers, and established for a specific reason or in combination with individual real-life social circles (Yang, 2023). The rise of network society and the boom of Internet media has led to a significant shift in how people communicate. Individuals are increasingly using social media platforms to engage with like-minded people, forming diverse circles. This shift has prompted a re-tribalization of social interactions, where interpersonal and group communication regain prominence, making community one of the most vital platforms for social engagement. These circle and community facilitate deeper engagement and collaboration among members, enabling them to share ideas, support one another,

and cultivate collective identities. As a result, group communication has become the most important form of communication beyond mass communication (Zheng, 2018). In this evolving landscape, the significance of network circles cannot be overstated. They not only enhance social connectivity but also reshape the dynamics of public discourse, offering individuals a space to express their opinions and build meaningful relationships.

Western scholars generally believe that ensuring the heterogeneity of cyberspace is the best way to govern public opinion (Loecherbach & Trilling, 2020). However, Chinese scholars express deeper concerns about the negative impact of echo chambers (Flaxman et al., 2016) on real-world society (Wu, 2018). Online circles often consist of like-minded individuals, leading to a high degree of homogeneity. This environment facilitates the rapid dissemination of popular views, while the mutual trust among members makes it difficult to challenge for dissenting opinions to emerge. As a result, individuals with minority perspectives may feel increasingly isolated and reluctant to voice their thoughts, further amplifying the spiral of silence. Prolonged exposure to a homogeneous information climate contributes significantly to the formation of echo chambers (Cinelli et al., 2021) and group polarization (Bolsen & Shapiro, 2018). Within these groups, members predominantly engage with confirmatory information, which not only distorts their perceptions but also intensifies polarization. Experimental evidence indicates that individuals are likely to accept confirmatory information, even when it contains deliberately false claims (Del Vicario et al., 2016). In contrast, dissenting viewpoints are often disregarded or ignored altogether (Pokharel et al., 2022). The shared cognitive responses fostered in these echo chambers cultivate a culture that dismisses or ridicules alternative perspectives. This environment further entrenches silence among dissenters, making it increasingly difficult for them to voice their opinions. As a result, the dynamics of groupthink can solidify, reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting the diversity of thought within the community.

Additionally, emotional expression within these circles can also be heavily influenced by group dynamics. Individual emotions can resonate within the group, leading to emotional contagion that reinforces shared sentiments (Lu & Hong, 2022). This emotional transmission can significantly impact cooperation and conflict dynamics among groups (Barsade et al., 2018; Kane et al., 2023). When members are collectively engaged in similar emotional experiences, they may become more entrenched in their views, making it even more challenging for dissenting voices to emerge. Moreover, Users' emotional states are closely tied to their level of engagement within the community (O'Brien & Toms, 2008). Higher involvement in an echo chamber often correlates with a more negative emotional state (Del Vicario et al., 2016). As online interactions foster emotional exchanges, these heightened emotions can lead to more extreme views, creating an environment where expressing differing opinions becomes particularly risky. This emotional contagion not only strengthens group cohesion but also generates a feedback loop that actively discourages dissent, further reinforcing existing viewpoints and stifling diverse perspectives.

A particularly intriguing phenomenon is that users frequently curate their online personas to seek recognition and approval within their circles. This desire for social

validation drives individuals to present a carefully crafted image that aligns with the prevailing sentiments of their circle (Zhang et al., 2024). As a result, users often feel compelled to conform to the dominant narratives and expectations of their group, which can lead to significant self-censorship (Sharvit et al., 2018). When individuals perceive that certain opinions are unpopular or may conflict with the majority viewpoint, they may choose to withhold their true thoughts and feelings. This fear of jeopardizing their status or acceptance within the community can create a chilling effect, discouraging open dialogue and authentic expression. Instead of sharing diverse perspectives, members may prioritize maintaining harmony or avoiding conflict, ultimately reinforcing the group's existing beliefs. This dynamic not only limits the range of viewpoints represented within the community but also stifles personal growth and the exploration of new ideas (Treen et al., 2020). The pressure to conform can lead to a lack of critical engagement with differing opinions, resulting in an echo chamber effect that further isolates dissenters. Consequently, the collective identity of the group becomes more homogeneous, as individuals increasingly align their expressions with the perceived expectations of their peers, rather than contributing to a richer, more nuanced conversation.

5.5 Idol Culture and the Spiral of Silence: Emotional Conformity in Fan Spaces

Building on the earlier discussion of emotional spirals and the demographic characteristics of China's digital users, one notable and culturally specific phenomenon that further illustrates the evolution of the **spiral of silence in China** is the rise of **idol culture and fan communities (fanquan 饭圈)**. These digitally native, highly organized online collectives exemplify how **emotional expression, group conformity, and public silence** intersect in a collectivist digital culture.

China's social media is not only a platform for political or civic discourse but also a space where **youth identity, emotion, and collective belonging** are increasingly played out through fandom. Fan communities rally around celebrities—referred to as “idols”—with intense emotional investment and loyalty. These communities often **operate as echo chambers**, amplifying positive sentiment toward their idol while **actively silencing dissent** through practices such as mass reporting, harassment, and online shaming (Negro, 2023). As a result, dissenting or critical voices—whether from within or outside the fan group—are often absent from public discourse, not necessarily because such opinions do not exist, but because individuals fear social ostracism or reputational damage.

This environment reflects a **digital adaptation of the spiral of silence**, where group pressure is not only ideological but also emotional. Users internalize the dominant emotional tone—usually celebratory and hyper-loyal—and refrain from expressing negative or divergent views, especially during scandals or controversies involving idols. For example, when public figures such as Kris Wu or Zhang

Zhehan became involved in scandals, the initial reaction was often dominated by fans defending their idols, discouraging any early public criticism. Over time, as sentiment shifts, the collective silence may reverse, but not without first creating an emotionally coercive environment that mirrors the classic spiral of silence effect.

This phenomenon also underscores the **generational and cultural nuances** of online silence in China. As noted earlier, China's online population is predominantly composed of **young, emotionally expressive users**, whose interactions are deeply shaped by **collectivist norms** and **digital group affiliations**. In fan spaces, emotional alignment with the group becomes a marker of loyalty, while deviation can trigger exclusion. The **emotional contagion** discussed in Sect. 5.3 is especially visible here, as users mimic prevailing sentiments to signal belonging and avoid isolation—core mechanisms of the spiral of silence.

By examining idol culture through the lens of **digital emotion, youth engagement, and conformity**, this section reinforces the chapter's central argument: that **new forms of social media interaction in China are reshaping the spiral of silence**, not only in political spheres but also in popular culture and everyday communication. These fan-driven spirals of silence reflect the evolving relationship between **technology, emotion, and cultural norms**, creating new challenges and possibilities for public discourse in the digital age.

Idol fan communities in China are a vivid embodiment of what scholars now refer to as *network circles* (Yang, 2023)—digitally mediated, emotionally charged collectives that not only reinforce shared identity but also significantly shape public discourse within their boundaries. These *fanquan* operate as tight-knit social ecosystems where collective norms are not only ideological but emotional, and where loyalty is policed as a form of belonging. Similar to other online network circles described in Sect. 5.4, fan communities exhibit high degrees of homogeneity and mutual reinforcement, creating environments where dissent is met with resistance or outright suppression. The emotional intensity of these circles fosters strong group cohesion, but also a chilling effect on alternative viewpoints.

These communities mirror the logic of echo chambers (Flaxman et al., 2016) in that members are continuously exposed to affirming messages and emotional narratives that support their idol. This not only reinforces collective identities but also leads to *emotional contagion*, which silences more critical or diverse perspectives. Dissenters often face reputational risk, emotional backlash, or coordinated attacks—heightening the pressure to conform. This mirrors findings by Lu and Hong (2022) and others, who note that emotional transmission within tightly aligned online groups can lead to spiraling affective climates and the suppression of non-normative sentiments.

Case Example: The Kris Wu Scandal and Emotional Silencing in Fan Spaces

One illustrative example of emotional conformity and the spiral of silence in China's fan culture is the 2021 scandal involving Chinese-Canadian pop star Kris Wu. Wu was accused of sexual misconduct, leading to a major public backlash and his eventual arrest. In the initial stages of the scandal, however, much of the discourse within fan communities was dominated by *defensive* and emotionally charged narratives that sought to protect Wu's image.

Thousands of fans posted messages of support, framing the accusations as false or malicious, and actively mobilized to report or discredit opposing views. Some even launched coordinated harassment campaigns against accusers or users expressing skepticism. These actions were not officially orchestrated but emerged organically from within emotionally bonded fan groups. Dissenting voices, including fans who felt conflicted or disappointed, often chose silence over criticism to avoid ostracism or digital retaliation.

This collective response reveals a unique form of digital emotional coercion—one where expressing a divergent opinion, even a nuanced or questioning one, becomes socially risky. As the scandal unfolded and state media intervened, the emotional tone of discourse gradually shifted, but only after a period in which conformity was enforced through fan-driven social pressure.

Discussion

Social Bots: A New Subject Leads to Silence

The Kris Wu case exemplifies how social bots and automated accounts can influence public opinion. During the scandal, numerous fake accounts and bots flooded social media platforms, either defending Wu or attacking the accusers, creating a distorted narrative and overwhelming genuine discourse. This manipulation contributed to a climate where dissenting voices were drowned out, aligning with the concept of the spiral of silence.

Emotional Spirals: A New Influence on Silence

The emotional response to the Kris Wu allegations was intense and polarized. Outrage and anger dominated online discussions, while more measured or dissenting opinions were often suppressed. This emotional contagion led to a collective emotional spiral, where individuals conformed to the prevailing sentiments to avoid social isolation, mirroring the dynamics discussed in your section on emotional spirals.

Circle: A New Interweaving with Silence

The formation of online circles or echo chambers was evident during the Kris Wu scandal. Supporters and detractors formed tightly-knit groups, amplifying their views and isolating opposing perspectives. This homogeneity within circles reinforced existing beliefs and discouraged the expression of dissenting opinions, illustrating the impact of online communities on public discourse.

The Kris Wu scandal serves as a particularly illuminating case, not just of fan loyalty, but of network circle dynamics in action. As his case unfolded, the fan community rallied defensively, flooding platforms with supportive messages, drowning out dissent, and discouraging early public criticism. This reaction was not merely spontaneous, but shaped by years of emotionally driven group identity formation within fan circles. The circle's cohesion and the desire for social approval created powerful self-censorship dynamics. Members who questioned the dominant view risked alienation or attacks, and many chose silence. In this case, the network circle acted as both emotional amplifier and gatekeeper of narrative, exemplifying the intersection of digital identity, emotional conformity, and the spiral of silence.

5.6 Dual Spiral: A New Collision Beyond Silence

China has a unique media environment that includes both state-controlled and independent platforms (Wang, 2023). Traditional mainstream media, which often represents authoritative viewpoints, typically aligns closely with government narratives. In contrast, social media and other digital platforms provide a space for a more informal, diverse, and sometimes critical range of public opinions. This dynamic gives rise to two distinct yet interrelated spheres of discourse that emerge simultaneously during significant events or controversies. The first sphere is the official discourse space, governed by the state and mainstream media. Its primary objectives are to foster social stability, minimize conflict, and promote collective values. The second sphere is the folk discourse space, formed by the public itself, serving as a channel for communication and the expression of public opinion (Jia et al., 2014). Despite their independence, these two spirals interact in meaningful ways, often leading to collisions of opinion that can significantly shape public perception (Hu, 2023).

As these two spheres of opinion coexist, they frequently collide, creating a dynamic space where competing narratives can challenge one another (Wang, 2023). For instance, a report from mainstream media may be countered by viral commentary on social media, sparking debates and discussions that shape the overall discourse surrounding an event. This interaction fosters a more nuanced understanding of public concerns, revealing underlying societal tensions and diverse perspectives. The dual spiral phenomenon illustrates that public opinion is influenced not only by authoritative voices but also by relatable and emotionally charged expressions prevalent in the entertaining spiral. This interplay can significantly shift how events

are perceived, as social media narratives gain traction and compel mainstream media to adapt their reporting or engage with emerging public sentiments. Ultimately, this process enriches the conversation and highlights the complexity of contemporary discourse in society.

The evolution of the Spiral of Silence in China reflects a multifaceted interplay of social, technological, and emotional factors that have transformed public discourse. The emergence of social bots has introduced complexities in how opinions are disseminated and perceived, often leading to amplified silence or misrepresentation of public sentiment. Additionally, emotional spirals have emerged as a powerful influence, shaping individuals' willingness to express dissent and contributing to the atmosphere of conformity. The concept of circles has redefined the landscape of communication, creating new spaces for dialogue while simultaneously reinforcing the pressures of silence. Finally, the dual spiral phenomenon has illustrated the collision between authoritative narratives and grassroots voices, showcasing how these dynamics can both challenge and reinforce existing silences. Together, these elements underscore a shifting paradigm in China's public discourse, where the boundaries of expression are continuously negotiated in response to technological advancements and evolving social landscapes. However, classical theories are continually brought to life through their interactions with individuals, technology, and society, evolving over time.

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Chapter 6

How/Can We Re-Think Silence in the Social Media Age?



Ambika Vishwanath

6.1 Introduction

Social media is a powerful tool, shaping, influencing and being influenced by public discourse. With the SpaceX programme creating history by posting a tweet on X directly from a spacecraft (X.com) 700 kms away from earth, we're setting a new record in this age of digital communication. It is said that the future is digital and with digital technology enhanced by new artificial intelligence systems on a daily basis, we have little idea in reality of what that future will look like. In this age of possibility, where human interaction has fundamentally changed, has the manner in which we express ourselves, especially in an increasingly charged pernicious atmosphere, also changed? Do we continue to silence ourselves or has social media within the ambit of the digital age made us bolder, with new forms of expression and innovation? While the answer to these questions are not binary and difficult to answer, this digital landscape is also where the Spiral of Silence manifests in unique and complex ways.

The Spiral of Silence (Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, 2021), a theory developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1974, states that individuals are less likely to express their opinions when they perceive themselves to be in the minority, fearing social isolation or reprisal. The theory sparked widespread debate and several ideas following the initial hypothesis through the 70s and 80s; it has a certain relevance in understanding behavioural patterns especially in an increasingly polarised world. However, it is also somewhat limited in its ability to understand people's opinion patterns in an evolving internet age, where the anonymity of social media provides a certain layer of protection and comfort from the previously understood notions of both expression and isolation.

In a society like India, where family opinions and social groups are still critical factors in a person's life, self-censorship can play a key role to be accepted or avoid

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isolation. Anecdotally, most Indians, especially those whose actions on some form of online social interaction, can probably attest to the fact that family plays a role in shaping opinions. In India, with its diversity of languages, cultures, and social hierarchies, this phenomenon takes on distinct dimensions like religious sentiments, caste dynamics, regionalism, urban–rural divide, linguistic differences, digital divide, etc. This chapter explores these dimensions by focusing on a couple of recent events and attempting to probe into certain factors that characterise online interactions in India.

India's physical and digital infrastructure have grown phenomenally in the last two decades and efforts to modernise are ongoing. The country's subscriber base has grown from 25.1 crore in 2014 to 95.4 crore in 2024, highlighting massive adoption. The National Infrastructure pipeline identifies gaps and constraints, and seeks to address them. Mobile phones and internet plans over the last decade have become phenomenally cheaper and affordable across societies, where less than 1% of homes have landlines but 85% of the population have a mobile phone as of 2023.¹ With 487.5 million people using the app, India is the country with the most WhatsApp users as of 2024 (WhatsApp Users by Country, 2024). The digital revolution has transformed India's public sphere where platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter/X become powerful arenas for political expression and opinion formation.

India's social media landscape is characterised by its vast and diverse user base, a steady increase in internet penetration, and the substantial role of these platforms in influencing the public opinion. The fact that this spans across regions, social and economic groups, religious or other affiliations, gender or party memberships suggests a broader, systemic issue in India's digital public sphere. It might indicate that the Spiral of Silence isn't just about ideological minorities feeling unable to speak; rather, it's a widespread phenomenon affecting even those who might align with perceived majority opinions. This furthermore reinforces the perception that expressing views, political or otherwise, is risky, regardless of one's stance. Thus the online discourse may not accurately reflect the true diversity of opinions in India. It can rather just potentially influence both public perception and policy-making processes. The volume of the populace and the ease with which people can now express their views, adds to the complexity of communications as people are constantly equipped with newer mediums of expression. This is particularly prevalent and relevant in discourse around politics or current events, where the story changes rapidly.

Some social media creators and supporters have hoped that social media platforms like Facebook and X (formerly twitter) might produce different enough discussion venues that those with minority views might feel freer to express their opinions, thus broadening public discourse and adding new perspectives to everyday discussion of political issues. Previous 'spiral of silence' findings as to people's willingness to speak up in various settings also apply to social media users. Those who use Facebook were more willing to share their views if they thought their followers agreed with them.²

¹ <https://www.dataforindia.com/living-conditions-access-to-comm-tech/#mobile-phone-usage-in-india>.

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/08/26/social-media-and-the-spiral-of-silence/>

A study by the Reuters Institute (Aneez et al., 2019) found that 55% of Indian social media users were reluctant to discuss politics online due to fears of offending others or facing harassment. The data reveals a significant trend in India’s digital landscape: despite high engagement with news on social media, there’s a pervasive concern about expressing political views online. It speaks to a variety of factors but fundamentally concerns about reaction from family, where members might be part of the same social media applications, fear of trouble with the authorities and possibly fear of negative reactions from potential employers. These concerns are markedly higher in India compared to the United States, and are on par with countries like Brazil and Turkey. As the study states, this concern transcends political affiliations, which underscores the understanding that it is not holding an opinion itself, but holding one that might be contrarian to others that is problematic. See Figs. 6.1 and 6.2.

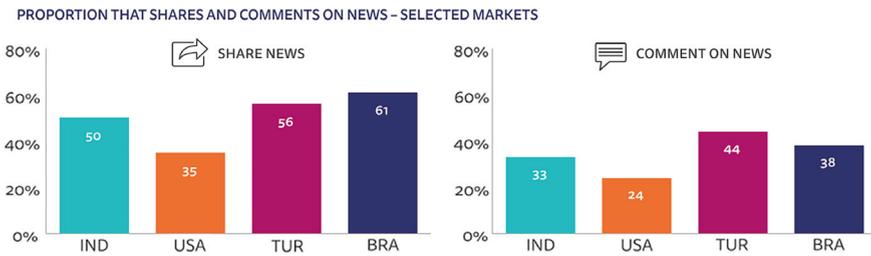


Fig. 6.1 Proportion that shares and comments on news

PROPORTION CONCERNED ABOUT DIFFERENT CONSEQUENCES OF OPENLY EXPRESSING THEIR POLITICAL VIEWS ONLINE – INDIA

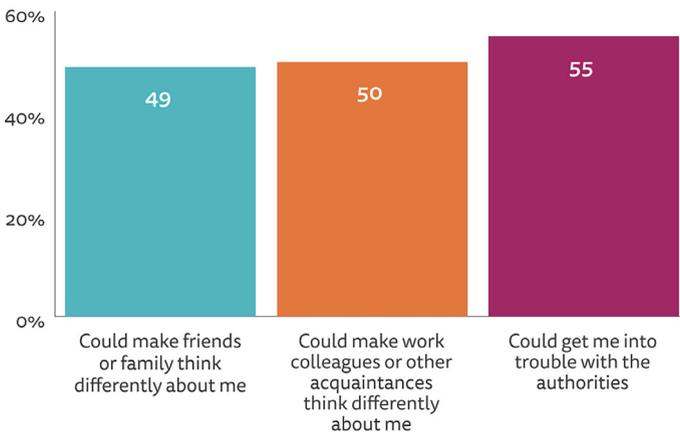


Fig. 6.2 Proportion concerned about different consequences of openly expressing their political views online

Taken by itself, the study strongly supports the Spiral of Silence theory in India's social media context. The fear of negative consequences—legal, social, or professional—creates an effect on political or other expression, supporting to a certain extent the theory of silence. Even when individuals hold strong political views, they may refrain from expressing them openly or in forums where circles of social interaction that matter might prompt a negative reaction. There is a perception of risk or isolation, it is yet unclear to what extent this perception might translate into reality. Thus, in the public domain, to an unconnected viewer, certain views or opinions can appear more dominant than they actually are, simply because opposing views are not being expressed or are too few to catch an algorithm that guides a platform.

According to the selective exposure theory, individuals tend to consume and share news that aligns with their existing beliefs and biases when they have access to a wide range of information. A research by Jonathan Morgan et al. (2013) reveals that users share news in similar patterns, regardless of the outlet's perceived ideology. Interestingly, as users share more news content, they begin to include outlets with opposing viewpoints, to introduce a level of diversity in content. However, it is important to note that while this might have been true in the early years of Twitter usage, the interaction of the platform for most have changed overtime.

This is also where the role of public organisations beyond traditional and new media come in, including think tanks, university centres or foundations. Think tanks and research organisations, especially those in the geopolitical space play a unique role in shaping public policy and are increasingly playing a role in influencing public perception through the content that is more widely accessible. These organisations navigate a complex terrain where expressing political opinions can both influence and be influenced by public perception. This is also seen through the actions of top level leadership perceived to be close to government or policy actors. As organisations dedicated to policy research and advocacy, they are uniquely positioned to inform public discourse by providing data-driven insights and expert analysis.

6.2 The India Story: Approach and Context

To explore the Spiral of Silence in India's social media landscape, this chapter employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, using publicly available data and data sets where possible. The objective here is to open up the conversation of how various factors can have an impact on expression and thus public discourse within India's diverse digital ecosystem and ask questions that will hopefully prompt further research.

The quantitative aspect of the chapter focuses on analysing social media metrics, trends and existing survey data to identify patterns of online expression, engagement, and potential silence. Survey data from external organisations like Reuters to studies conducted by Indian researchers and academics provide an insight into public perceptions, fears and motivations for participating or refraining from online discussions, political or otherwise. Where feasible, the data and surveys have been analysed and

specific case studies have been considered in the India context to provide a more nuanced understanding of the Spiral of Silence in India's social media landscape. This involves exploring real-world instances where social and political dynamics have shaped the willingness of individuals and groups to speak out or remain silent and how this may or may not have affected policy outcomes.

Due to the limited scope of this paper, the author did not conduct primary surveys, but stresses the need for them to have a better view and understanding of the landscape across the country, especially given the diversity of language, access, usage of social media, generational gaps etc. It is also important to keep in mind here that while social media might seemingly have an effect on political outcomes and this policy decisions, perception is also derived from connections and networks not unlike the pre internet era—it is thus still hard to quantify the extent of influence. With the internet allowing one to be faceless and nameless it presents a different set of challenges—the “armchair revolutionary” can be anyone vs those that have taken to the streets over generations to protests that have led to noticeable change.

Historical Development of Digital India

India's digital journey began in the early 2000s (The Economic Times) with the introduction of affordable broadband and mobile services. Since then, the digital landscape has grown significantly. It has been driven by government initiatives like the “Digital India” campaign launched in 2015 (Digital India) and a number of large Indian conglomerates entering the telecom market. Additionally, the consistent increase of affordable phones that have “smart” features and low-cost data plans, particularly from giants like Reliance Jio, has enabled millions of Indians to access the internet causing an exponential increase in social media usage.

However, despite these advancements, the digital divide remains stark, particularly between urban and rural areas. According to data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), only 24% of rural households in India have access to the internet, compared to a 66% penetration rate in urban areas as of May 2024 (NIIT Foundation, 2024). This disparity is not just geographical; it is also influenced by socio-economic factors such as income, education, gender, and caste. As a result, while urban India may have the opportunity to engage robustly in online discourse, a significant portion of the rural population remains disconnected, affecting their ability to participate in or shape the narrative on social media platforms. However, evidence tells us that rural populations still enjoy a variety of “off-line” networks, including religious and social circles, that play a key role in the passing and sharing of information, impact and influence. There is also no doubt that in the coming years India will see greater mobile and internet usage across the country, where access might be limited due to certain factors such as income, age or gender but not necessarily location. Research from Data for India tells us that a majority of Indian phone users, especially women,

share their phone with a family member, and are not exclusive users of the device they use.³

While there is noticeable change in traditional means of accessing and consuming news and information from a relative to the local neighbour to the radio to the smartphone, who delivers the news, who understands it, the difference between what is fake and truth are important questions that need to be asked in the context of Noelle-Nuemann's theory. It was not too long ago that the news and the newsreader/writer were extremely trusted, be it from print, radio or television, and a certain generation in India still exists that is likely to "trust the news."

Maya Mirchandani's "Digital hatred, real violence: Majoritarian radicalisation and social media in India" discusses the rise of majoritarian radicalisation and hate speech on social media in India, particularly targeting religious minorities (Mirchandani, 2018). It examines the intersection of populist politics, identity-based nationalism, and digital platforms and the creation of an environment where hate speech and violence against minorities are increasingly normalised. Mirchandani argues that this trend poses a significant threat to India's social fabric and democratic values and says that "Social media have the singular power to amplify the speed and force of messages that advocate or condone abuse against minorities and allow incendiary speech to spread like wildfire." Who these statements are aimed at, what are the outcomes, both immediate and long term, who should participate are important questions to be considered. A case study discussed by her states that Prashant Patel Umrao, who is verified by Twitter with over 50,000 followers, played into this sentiment when he wrote, after describing a crime purportedly committed by a Muslim against a Hindu, that "Every Kafir girl is on target of peaceful!"

Social media in India, has amplified polarisation and created echo chambers, likely contributing to some forms of silence. This has especially been stark in 2024 where several major democracies around the world have seen an election. The fear of social isolation, online harassment, or even legal repercussions can discourage people from voicing dissenting opinions, especially when dominant narratives are aggressively promoted by influential political figures or groups. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where only the majority opinion is visible, further pushing minority voices across groups to the margins.

Foreign policy, not traditionally debated in domestic public spaces, has increasingly become a mainstay in social media platforms. Public perception of foreign policy is often polarised, with social media either trying to amplify the nationalist rhetoric or creating ambiguity or offering a critical view of the government's foreign engagements. Institutions, beyond the media and government bodies, that are public and vocal—anyone from research centres to universities to think tanks and NGOs—offer analysis, recommendations and ideas for debate. In many cases these opinions and ideas are not always rooted in fact or in-depth understanding of a subject matter, but are usually offered for a fast moving social media landscape and audience. In

³ <https://www.dataforindia.com/living-conditions-access-to-comm-tech/#mobile-phone-usage-in-india>.

any country that is increasingly polarised these ideas and analysis is also bucketed into one side or the other.

In India, most organisations are seen as either supportive or critical of a government policy or agenda, further amplified by influential people and prominent members who run these organisations. Social media becomes one of the primary platforms to disseminate research and engage with the public. The broader public, largely the urban elite, often view the products of these organisations (articles, reports, commentaries etc.) as a formal government position, often without engaging with them in a critical manner. Their positions on critical issues receive widespread attention, particularly among urban, middle-class audiences who consume domestic and foreign policy analysis through social media. The need to protect credibility and avoid alienating stakeholders can lead to cautious communication strategies, where controversial issues are either downplayed or avoided altogether. As the manner in which we access and consume information and debate issues that matter to us evolves, we need to further understand how the concepts of silence can play into various levels of our decision making process.

Decriminalisation of LGBTQIA+ Rights (Article 377)

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a colonial-era law, criminalised consensual same-sex relations. For decades, the LGBTQIA+ community in India faced legal, social, and cultural discrimination, where authorities often used the code as a means of harassment. Article 377 served as a symbol of institutionalised prejudice. In 2018, the Supreme Court of India delivered a landmark verdict that decriminalised homosexuality and declared that consensual same-sex relations between adults were no longer a criminal offence. The Navtej Johar judgement not only “recognised an individual’s right to their sexual orientation but also reaffirmed that consensual acts between adults are protected, while non-consensual acts remain criminalised.”⁴

Though the details of the verdict still remain under contention, especially with the introduction of new criminal laws in India, this ruling was hailed as a historic moment for LGBTQIA+ rights and a significant step towards equality and inclusion in a broader sense. As expected, the verdict and decriminalisation sparked widespread discussions across the country, including in traditional media and on social platforms. Users expressed opinions ranging from celebration and support to condemnation and rejection, where traditional family values, religious edicts became a part of the discussion. Not surprisingly there was a lot of hate and violence also directed at members of the community and their supporters, physical and online. It became, to a certain extent, an important litmus test for India’s ability to embrace diversity in a more present cultural context and uphold individual rights in the face of deeply entrenched beliefs, regardless of the fact that some religious leaders came out in favour of the verdict.

⁴ <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/168671544/>

The reaction to this was evident on social media, where individuals and groups shared content to either support or oppose. The opposition campaigns at times included derogatory language, misinformation, and fear-mongering, targeting the LGBTQIA+ community and those who supported the decriminalisation. The polarised nature of these discussions contributed to an environment where expressing views, especially in favour of the community, became challenging, especially for individuals who feared backlash from family, peers or society at large. Anecdotal evidence demonstrated that it became increasingly hard for younger members of society to openly stand in support of their friends who benefitted from the verdict. As a young X user, known to the author, stated “I’ve been given an ultimatum and I choose my friends.”⁵

In many ways the reaction to this verdict speaks to both the increasing polarisation that exists on certain issues and the power that social media gives to people and voices. While it seemed that an overwhelming majority of young India and urban India supported the verdict and that the conservative voices dominated other sections of society, it will, in such a large diverse country like India, never quite be possible to fully understand the extent of support or silence. It is true that there was a lot of silencing, and self-censorship of voices and opinions was evident in the aftermath of the Article 377 verdict. Many individuals who supported LGBTQIA+ rights hesitated to express their opinions publicly due to the strong opposition and fear of social ostracization. The conservative voices on social media, especially from influential leaders across domains, created an atmosphere that made it difficult for minority voices to be heard in certain spaces. This fear of isolation led to self-censorship among those who supported the ruling but felt uncomfortable expressing their views in public forums, particularly in conservative communities or among family members. However, prominent activists, celebrities, leaders and influencers took to the media to share their stories and supported the decision challenging the negative narratives. This encouraged more people to join the conversation. But does this translate to a true open discussion, probably not. It is also true that many who opposed the ruling, due to entrenched religious, social or cultural beliefs or a view that the ruling did not in fact benefit the queer community, were also in fear of speaking out.

The Long Awaited Women’s Reservation Bill

The Women’s Reservation Bill which had been a subject of debate and discussion for over two decades was officially passed on 21st September 2023 as a Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 and in Hindi referred to as Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam (Women’s Reservation Bill 2023 [the Constitution (One Hundred Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023]). It seeks to reserve one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. While reservation of

⁵ Taken from the authors X account, user not mentioned for safety.

seats for women might be considered a small win, one that is too little too late, in the long standing complexities surrounding women's political participation it is historic.

The bill, introduced in Rajya Sabha in 2008, was referred to the Standing Committee of Law. It saw some progress in 2010 when it was passed in the Rajya Sabha (Council of States) but lapsed within the 15th Lok Sabha. The bill has been a subject of extensive public discourse and polarising debate for years. It was introduced again in a special session on 19th September 2023, and passed in the Lok Sabha on 20th September 2023, and subsequently in the Rajya Sabha on 21st September, 2023. Pushed through and passed months before the general election in India, the bill and intent behind it was clearly political. The irony of championing "women-led development" at the G20 during India's presidency in 2023 while political representation in the country was far below global average, was not lost on most. While women might be making great strides in India in various spaces, with the government championing their cause across sectors, political representation remains low. The debates highlighted, above all else, the need for institutional mechanisms to increase the participation of women in politics.

Public discourse reflected a divide in political opinion. Parties like the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) expressed support for the bill, while regional parties like the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal opposed it. The discourse, not unexpectedly, extended beyond politics into civil society, with women's rights groups, academics, and media organisations advocating for the passage of the bill. Social media platforms, news debates, and opinion pieces highlighted the potential benefits of having more women in politics. Think tanks, research organisations, independent institutions and influential figures, especially those with greater autonomy and convening power, helped sustain and shape public discourse on the Women's Reservation Bill. They played a significant role in influencing the political and social narrative around women's representation in India's legislative bodies.

The Centre for Social and Economic Progress for example provided a critical analysis of the structural challenges to the bill's implementation. Members of the PM-Economic Advisory Council, especially Member Shamika Ravi, put forth research that highlighted the benefits accrued over time with women's representation and greater economic participation and raised important questions about the inclusion of marginalised women within the quota system. NGOs also suggested ways to ensure that women from disadvantaged backgrounds were not left out of the political process, as reservation does not always translate to equal representation.

One can argue that the spiral of silence either peaked or did not apply at all in this context as the opposing views to this bill were rare and largely expressed through conservative political party leaders. Lalu Prasad Yadav, a leader of the Rashtriya Janata Dal, strongly opposed the bill, arguing that it would favour privileged women and leave women from backward and minority communities behind. While his stance led to debates on inclusivity within the quota system itself, an important question to consider is that it did not lead to the silencing of voices. In a country like India, where women's themes can be intensely debated, where there often is a culture of silence around uncomfortable issues, many questions arise from this specific case. Did people

feel emboldened to speak and debate on this bill and this particular question because it was championed by the ruling party; and conversely did many non-supporters not speak out for fear of backlash by the party? If the former is the case, does it feed Neumanns theory in a modern context where narrative is controlled?

6.3 Conclusion

We live in a digital age that has only just begun, in many ways we have little concept of how this will evolve. Only a few years ago for example it was unconceivable that Wi-Fi would be so freely available on a plane ride, in some ways making peoples time more productive but also reinforcing an urge to stay connected. With information about events around the world at ones fingers tips and the ability to have an opinion on anything and everything, maintaining objectivity in such an environment becomes challenging. It is also equally challenging when the perception is that without a social media presence one is somewhat inadequate. The “fear of missing out” is real, as is the western liberal somewhat extremist cancel culture that adds different barriers around expression. It is also equally challenging when news or information is compromised without ones knowledge—where the ability to differentiate between what is real and what is fake can be near impossible with the various intelligence tools available today. Given this context what does this mean for human interaction, where the online world can often be anything but “social.” Additionally, what does this mean for an individual’s willingness to speak and express themselves without fear or self-censorship.

Within these challenges, as online platforms shift and move into smaller circles with niche communities, patterns of consumptions are also likely to change. As patterns of consumption change we need new research and understanding to elucidate what new factors will shape an individual’s willingness to express themselves and speak out on various matters, especially contentious subjects such as politics, policy, religion or others. There is no doubt Neumann’s theory needs a revision, especially as social media and online platforms provide some measure of safety and anonymity. But we would be foolhardy to assume that we can do away with the underlying concepts of the “spiral of silence” theory, even though communication and interaction has changed, fear and self-censorship and the need to be accepted remains human and relevant. Anonymity in the social media age might seem to embolden many, but it adds another layer to the theory that fear of expression—both positive or negative—have consequences we do not want to accept.

In India, a vibrant democracy by many accounts, has a complicated relationship with expression. On the one had there are new powerful voices emerging from previously suppressed social groups and castes and on the other hand we see suppression of documentaries, writing or other mediums that are deemed as propaganda and against national interest. Freedom of expression is enshrined in the Constitution of India Article 19(2), with a few caveats added in subsequent amendments; and in a diverse pluralistic society implementation of that expression has swung with the

political pendulum. The meaning of freedom of expression in India will continue to be tested, as the manner and scope of expression changes with technology. Without protecting a citizens freedoms even if they may be critical of the majority opinion of the day, Neumann's theory will continue to hold. Social media and online platforms have given a voice to the voiceless, where till very recently only the opinions of a small elite were heard; but it has also given rise to the online armies that do not bode dissent of criticism of those their perceive to protect. Governments and people need to recognise the difference if the health of society and social interaction is to be protected.

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Chapter 7

Opinion Formation on Matters Concerning Public Figures



Tanya Finnie

7.1 Introduction and Overview

The Spiral of Silence theory, developed by German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), describes a social phenomenon where individuals are less likely to express dissenting opinions when they perceive themselves to be in the minority, driven by a fear of social isolation. This fear prompts people to gauge public opinion before sharing their views, and when they believe their opinions are unpopular, they tend to remain silent, thereby reinforcing the dominance of the perceived majority opinion. The theory is particularly relevant in the digital age, where social media platforms have become pivotal in shaping public discourse, amplifying dominant narratives, and potentially silencing dissenting voices even further. Digital technologies have transformed how information is disseminated and consumed, influencing the public's perception of what constitutes a majority or minority view (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014).

This chapter explores how the Spiral of Silence operates differently in individualistic and collectivist cultures by examining two contexts: the Gina Rinehart painting controversy in Australia and the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa. It examines the interplay of public opinion, fear of isolation, media influence, and the social impact of artistic expression within the Australian context.

By comparing these cases, we gain insight into how social media can either reinforce or disrupt the Spiral of Silence, depending on cultural dimensions, power dynamics, and the mechanisms of public opinion formation.

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7.2 Context

Australia is characterized by its individualistic culture, which typically encourages self-expression and diverse personal opinions. In such societies, people are more likely to openly express their views, even if they diverge from the majority (Triandis, 2001). This stands in stark contrast to collectivist cultures, where harmony and group cohesion are prioritized over individual viewpoints. Individualistic cultures, like Australia, often value low-context communication, where directness is appreciated, and open debate is encouraged. In this setting, Australians are more inclined to speak out, including sharing opinions in the media or public spaces, which may be more direct and forthright compared to countries where indirect communication styles prevail.

Ms Gina Rinehart, Australia's richest woman (Karmali, 2024), exemplifies the dynamic interplay of public opinion in an individualistic culture. Known for her outspoken and often controversial views, Rinehart has not shied away from making statements that provoke public discourse. For example in 2012, she controversially commented on a proposal to cut minimum wages: "If you're jealous of those with more money, don't just sit there and complain. Do something to make more money yourself—spend less time drinking or smoking and socializing, and more time working...Become one of those people who work hard, invest and build, and at the same time create employment and opportunities for others" (ABC News, 2012). Such remarks have led to viral reactions on various social media platforms, generating millions of comments from both celebrities and ordinary citizens, reflecting a broad spectrum of opinions.

Australia's strong norms and history of free speech and individual expression allow public figures like Rinehart to be subjects of both intense scrutiny and support. On the surface, this might suggest that the Spiral of Silence is less prevalent; however, the phenomenon can still be observed. Traditional media, which often align with dominant political or corporate interests, can significantly skew the landscape of perceived majority opinions. Social media usage in turn influences political discussion (Hampton et al., 2017). Rupert Murdoch's media empire, for example, has been a significant force in shaping public opinion in Australia (as well as the UK and the US), often pushing a right-wing agenda. The Guardian's 2023 article titled "Power and scandal: how Murdoch drove the UK, US, and Australia to the right" (Ghosh, 2023), underscores how media ownership can influence the narrative, leading individuals to perceive certain viewpoints as more widespread or accepted than they are.

The rise of social media adds layers of complexity to this landscape. While social media platforms provide space for a broader range of opinions and counter-narratives, they also tend to create echo chambers that reinforce dominant views. Algorithms that prioritize popular content often amplify these views, exacerbating the feeling of being in the minority for those with dissenting opinions. The Netflix documentary "The Social Dilemma" highlights how social media platforms manipulate behaviour and emotions, urging users to critically examine their own social media habits. Despite

these challenges, social media also has the potential to break the silence by amplifying marginalized voices and creating spaces for dissent.

7.3 Gina Rinehart/Vincent Namatjira: Case Study Analysis

The controversy surrounding Vincent Namatjira's painting of Gina Rinehart serves as a compelling case study for examining how social media can amplify diverse perspectives, even in a society where people are generally more outspoken. Namatjira's artwork, which portrayed Rinehart in a way that many found provocative, sparked significant debate across multiple platforms, from traditional news outlets to social media networks like Facebook and Twitter. The painting became a focal point for discussions on wealth, power, and representation in Australian society, demonstrating how art can influence public opinion and reflect broader societal attitudes.

The expression of opinions on social media, particularly concerning policy issues related to the Gina Rinehart controversy, is influenced by various cultural dimensions (Pew Research Center, 2014). In an individualistic culture like Australia, people are generally more willing to express dissenting opinions. However, the spiral of silence theory suggests that fear of isolation can still suppress minority voices, even in open societies (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). Social media has played a significant role in amplifying negative portrayals of Gina Rinehart, focusing on aspects like her appearance and overshadowing discussions about her business policies. The direct impact of social media on public figures like Rinehart demonstrates the duality of public portrayal (Plumwood, 2023), where she is seen both as a wealthy, lazy figure and a successful businesswoman.

On the other hand, Ms Reinhart has no doubt been triggered more by this painting than others may have been, due to the fact that she is such a public figure and on various previous occasions had unflattering pictures of herself appear in various public media formats.

Art serves as a powerful medium for social commentary and public discourse, especially in diverse cultural contexts. In Australia, where individualism is valued, art often mirrors personal perspectives and critiques social structures, contributing to public conversations about power dynamics, inequality, and representation. Namatjira's artistic expression, which challenges traditional narratives by painting powerful figures as he perceives them, underscores how art can provoke dialogue and encourage public debate.

Public figures, like Gina Rinehart, experience different impacts from social media scrutiny compared to lesser-known individuals due to their visibility and influence. This dynamic creates a challenging environment for public figures to navigate, where their actions and statements are constantly analyzed and debated. The direct impact of social media on Gina Rinehart over an extended time, triggered by unflattering depictions and exacerbated by harsh commentary on her appearance, overshadowing discussions on her business policies, likely implies she is more likely to overreact and use her status to control the narrative.

7.4 Arab Spring: A Comparative Lens Case Study Analysis

The Arab Spring provides a contrasting yet supportive example of how the Spiral of Silence can be disrupted, particularly in collectivist societies where group harmony and social cohesion are prioritized, and dissenting voices are often more deeply suppressed due to a strong emphasis on conformity and fear of social or governmental reprisals (Pew Research Center, 2014). Unlike Australia's individualistic culture, where public figures like Gina Rinehart are openly debated and critiqued, countries involved in the Arab Spring—such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria—traditionally emphasize social conformity and loyalty to the group or community. In such environments, dissent is less common due to the fear of isolation or even severe repercussions such as imprisonment, harassment, or death.

However, during the Arab Spring, which began in late 2010, social media emerged as a powerful tool that significantly influenced political dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube became essential for organizing protests, sharing information, and amplifying voices that had long been suppressed under authoritarian regimes. In these settings, where traditional media were often state-controlled, social media provided an alternative space for citizens to express dissenting opinions and mobilize collective action. This digital environment offered a relatively safe, anonymous, and rapid means of communication that helped break the Spiral of Silence.

The Arab Spring is an excellent case study of how technology and collective action can disrupt the Spiral of Silence (Pew Research Center, 2014). As more individuals began to share their dissenting views online, the perceived “majority opinion” started to shift. Social media facilitated the expression of minority opinions by providing a platform where early adopters of dissent could share personal stories of suffering under oppressive regimes. These stories were emotionally powerful and resonated with others who had similar experiences, creating a snowball effect where the visible and growing number of dissenters emboldened more people to join in. As the voices of dissent were amplified and supported by others, a tipping point was reached where collective action outweighed the fear of isolation and allowed for more open expression of dissenting opinions without the fear of social or governmental retaliation.

A notable example is the use of hashtags like #Jan25 in Egypt, which allowed users to bypass state-controlled narratives, unify under a shared purpose, and coordinate massive protests. This online-to-offline mobilization weakened the state's monopoly on information and created a new, supportive public sphere where dissenting voices could find strength in numbers. The Arab Spring demonstrates that in collectivist cultures, breaking the Spiral of Silence often requires a critical mass of voices challenging the status quo simultaneously. Once this critical mass is reached, the social norm begins to shift, and the once-silenced opinions become more visible and accepted.

This dynamic is crucial when considering the cultural dimensions of individualism versus collectivism. In collectivist cultures like those involved in the Arab Spring,

public opinion is often shaped by a strong need for consensus and the avoidance of conflict. Therefore, breaking the Spiral of Silence required a collective realization that individuals were not alone in their dissatisfaction. Social media facilitated this awareness by allowing like-minded individuals to find each other, realize their shared grievances, and organize in ways that amplified their voices and empowered them to challenge dominant narratives.

The Arab Spring showed that in collectivist cultures, when a tipping point is reached, and it becomes evident that a significant number of people share a dissenting opinion, there can be a rapid shift in what is considered the “dominant” or “acceptable” public opinion. The shared experiences and collective grievances voiced through social media fostered a sense of unity and mutual support that overcame the fear of isolation. Thus, it wasn’t just individual courage but a collective courage that emerged, where people found strength in numbers and the support of an emerging, alternative public sphere.

By comparing this to the Gina Rinehart controversy in Australia, we see how the Spiral of Silence operates differently in individualistic versus collectivist contexts. While Australians may be more accustomed to expressing diverse and even controversial opinions due to a cultural emphasis on individualism and free speech, the dynamics of the Spiral of Silence still exist, especially when dissenting voices feel marginalized by dominant narratives in traditional media. In both contexts, social media plays a pivotal role in disrupting the Spiral of Silence, albeit through different mechanisms influenced by cultural norms and the need for collective or individual action.

7.5 Theoretical Framework

The spiral of silence theory helps explain why certain individuals remain silent while others dominate the conversation, particularly in the context of social media. In individualistic cultures like Australia, people may be more likely to express public opinions, while in collectivist cultures like China, the emphasis on saving face and harmony can inhibit dissenting voices (Xu, 2018).

In countries with strict governmental controls and limited freedom of speech like North Korea and China, the fear of repercussions from expressing dissenting views can be significant (King et al., 2013; South China Morning Post, 2024). This can lead to a strong Spiral of Silence effect, where individuals refrain from speaking out against the government or dominant political ideologies (King et al., 2013). Even in democracies, the Spiral of Silence can be observed, particularly on polarizing issues. Media portrayal of public opinion can influence whether people feel comfortable expressing minority views, contributing to a skewed perception of consensus. An example of this is the Chinese government’s ban on tree hugging, which was labelled as potentially dangerous and disruptive. The ban was reportedly imposed after a mass tree-hugging event near the imperial gardens in Beijing, which authorities viewed as a threat to national unity. The government feared that such gatherings

could foster dissent and even lead to claims of governmental misconduct. This ban reflects China's stringent control over public gatherings and activities perceived as politically sensitive (South China Morning Post, 2024). However, the ongoing popularity of tree hugging indicates a growing public interest in alternative forms of wellness and stress relief amidst high-pressure lifestyles. Referred to as a "new kind of psychological massage," the tree hugging craze has spread across China, with young people embracing greenery to relieve stress. This reflects a broader tendency within collectivist cultures to suppress activities that might challenge the status quo or disrupt social harmony, reinforcing the spiral of silence where individuals may hesitate to express opinions that diverge from the dominant narrative due to fear of social or governmental repercussions. According to Triandis (1995), collectivist societies tend to emphasize group cohesion and discourage behaviours that deviate from established social norms. This broader cultural orientation influences various aspects of social behaviour, including communication and media use, and can contribute to the reinforcement of the spiral of silence. In such environments, individuals may hesitate to express opinions that diverge from the dominant narrative due to fear of social or governmental repercussions, as maintaining harmony often takes precedence over individual dissent.

A study titled "When individual cultural orientation and mediated portrayal of risk intersect: Effects of individualism–collectivism and media framing on risk perception and attribution of responsibility" (Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, 2018) further explores the interaction between culture and media framing in shaping public opinion and risk perception. Using the cultural theory of risk, the study examines how individualism–collectivism and media framing (episodic vs. thematic framing) affect individuals' perceptions of risk and attribution of responsibility. The findings suggest that media framing significantly moderates the effect of individualism–collectivism on risk perception, with collectivists perceiving a more serious risk and experiencing more intense emotions than individualists when exposed to certain media frames.

This study's path analysis reveals that individualism–collectivism and media framing influence individuals' attribution of responsibility through emotion and perceived risk magnitude. In the context of the Spiral of Silence, this suggests that the way risks and issues are framed in media can either reinforce or disrupt silence based on cultural orientations. In collectivist societies, where media framing amplifies risk and emotional response, the Spiral of Silence might be stronger due to a heightened perception of risk and fear of social or political repercussions. Conversely, in individualistic societies, thematic framing could reduce perceived risks, thereby encouraging more open discussion and expression of dissenting opinions.

A comparative analysis of individualistic and collectivist cultures reveals differences in public opinion expression. In individualistic societies, people are encouraged to express personal opinions, even if they deviate from the majority. In contrast, collectivist cultures prioritize group cohesion and may intensify the spiral of silence effect, where minority opinions are suppressed to maintain harmony.

Media plays a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing public perceptions and silences. The way media outlets cover stories, whether in support of or against figures

like Gina Rinehart, influences public opinion. The reluctance of Rinehart's supporters to publicly defend her, due to fears of social backlash and professional repercussions, perpetuates the dominant narrative.

7.6 Analysis of Themes

In individualistic cultures (such as Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the Netherlands), the expression of personal opinions is often encouraged, even if they deviate from the majority (Xu, 2018). However, in collectivist cultures (such as China, Japan, South Korea, India, and Indonesia), harmony and conformity are valued, which can intensify the Spiral of Silence effect. It is worth noting that not everyone from a given country will be strictly individualist or collectivist, but these general cultural tendencies shape how public opinion is expressed and perceived.

In societies where maintaining face is crucial, people may avoid expressing dissenting opinions to prevent embarrassment or social sanction, reinforcing the Spiral of Silence. Many face-saving cultures overlap with collectivist cultures, but there are exceptions. For example, in Thailand, where saving face is important, there are also strong individualistic aspects such as personal freedom and expression in certain contexts. Similarly, Italy, while more individualistic, has the concept of "bella figura," which involves saving face and presenting oneself in a good light in public settings.

Both the Gina Rinehart controversy in Australia and the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa reveal how social media can serve as a powerful disruptor of the Spiral of Silence, albeit in different cultural contexts. In Australia, an individualistic society, the platform provides space for more direct and outspoken debates around public figures and policies. However, the Spiral of Silence can still manifest when dissenting voices feel overshadowed by dominant narratives propagated by traditional media outlets. In this context, social media's role is to amplify these minority opinions and prevent them from being silenced.

In contrast, in the collectivist cultures of the Arab Spring countries, the fear of isolation and social reprisal is more pronounced. Here, social media's role is even more crucial as it provides a relatively safe space for dissent to gain visibility and momentum. The online environment allows for the creation of a new, supportive public sphere where dissenting voices can find strength in numbers and challenge the dominant narrative. The Arab Spring demonstrated that in collectivist cultures, when a tipping point is reached and it becomes evident that a significant number of people share a dissenting opinion, there can be a rapid shift in what is considered the "dominant" or "acceptable" public opinion (Xu, 2018). The shared experiences and collective grievances voiced through social media fostered a sense of unity and mutual support that overcame the fear of isolation. Thus, it wasn't just individual courage but a collective courage that emerged, where people found strength in numbers and the support of an emerging, alternative public sphere.

Hashtags, such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #HeForShe, demonstrate how digital platforms can disrupt the Spiral of Silence by providing a safe and visible space for individuals to express dissenting or marginalized views. In both individualistic and collectivist cultures, social media allows voices that might otherwise be silenced due to fear of social isolation, backlash, or repression to gain prominence and support. When these hashtags trend, they signal to others that they are not alone in their experiences or beliefs, creating a collective sense of empowerment and challenging the dominant narratives. As more individuals join the conversation, the perceived 'majority opinion' begins to shift, reducing the fear of isolation and encouraging further participation. This phenomenon was seen in movements like #MeToo, where survivors of sexual harassment and assault shared their stories, thereby breaking the silence on issues that were often considered taboo or stigmatized. Similarly, hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName have played a pivotal role in mobilizing public opinion against systemic racism and violence, revealing the power of collective action in challenging oppressive structures and amplifying marginalized voices.

Additionally, anonymity on social media reduce accountability and amplify expression of extreme views by creating an environment where individuals feel emboldened to share opinions without fear of personal repercussions. This silence of moderate or opposing voices perpetuates the cycle, allowing extreme positions to gain further visibility and perceived legitimacy, distorting the overall discourse on social media. The anonymity of social media platforms enabled users to express extreme disdain and personal attacks against Rinehart, often crossing the line from criticism of her stance on it into personal vilification.

In Rinehart's case, any supportive voices or more balanced critiques were likely overshadowed by the sheer volume of negative and extreme comments, creating a skewed representation of public opinion and reinforcing the cycle of online bullying.

This elaboration ties the concept of hashtags to the Spiral of Silence by showing how they disrupt traditional power dynamics in public opinion formation. As globalization increases interactions between cultures, the dynamics of the Spiral of Silence can become more complex. For instance, international students or immigrants may experience the Spiral of Silence differently depending on their cultural background and the host society's norms around speech and dissent.

7.7 Conclusion

The Spiral of Silence theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how public opinion is formed and expressed across diverse cultural contexts. This analysis demonstrates that while individualistic societies, like Australia, may encourage open expression, the dynamics of silence persist, especially when dominant narratives overshadow minority voices. In collectivist cultures, the fear of isolation further suppresses dissent; however, social media can disrupt this cycle by amplifying collective grievances and offering platforms for dissenting opinions.

In both the Gina Rinehart painting controversy in Australia and the Arab Spring in the Middle East, social media has proven to be a critical tool for breaking the cycle of silence. Although the mechanisms may vary—shaped by cultural dimensions like individualism and collectivism—the underlying principle is consistent: individuals are more likely to express dissenting opinions when they perceive support from others. This dynamic not only disrupts the Spiral of Silence but also reshapes public discourse, fostering more diverse and inclusive conversations.

Controversial posts, which often garner more attention and engagement, can amplify extreme views and influence public perception, making the Spiral of Silence more pronounced. Yet, this same impulsivity can also work to break the silence, as rapid and widespread support for dissenting opinions can empower individuals to speak out. The Arab Spring serves as a profound example of how social media can disrupt the Spiral of Silence in collectivist societies, demonstrating that when individuals perceive sufficient support, they are more likely to challenge dominant narratives (Bellisario Media Lab, n.d.). This phenomenon prompts important questions about the role of digital platforms in fostering democratic engagement and whether similar patterns can be replicated in other contexts. Promoting environments that encourage open dialogue and respect dissenting opinions can mitigate the effects of the Spiral of Silence, leading to a more inclusive and representative public discourse.

For policymakers, media professionals, and activists, these findings highlight the need to actively foster environments that support diverse viewpoints and counteract echo chambers. By implementing measures that promote transparency and inclusivity on digital platforms, stakeholders can help break the cycle of silence and enable more democratic public discourse. As Neubaum and Krämer (2017) suggest, the way people perceive public opinion on social media significantly impacts their willingness to share dissenting views, underscoring the potential of these platforms to either reinforce or disrupt the Spiral of Silence depending on how opinions are monitored and presented. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics to develop effective strategies for encouraging open dialogue in an increasingly interconnected world.

Overall, the Spiral of Silence theory remains a crucial tool for understanding the complex dynamics of opinion expression and public perception globally. While social media can amplify impulsive and extreme views due to its immediate nature, it also holds significant potential to break the silence and reshape public discourse in powerful and transformative ways (Bellisario Media Lab, n.d.).

Bonus Table

Here are some additional insights to add depth to the understanding of how cultural dimensions shape media consumption and influence, aligning well with the above comparative analysis of collectivist and individualist contexts. It provides a more comprehensive view of the cross-cultural dynamics in media content, consumption, and effects. See Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 Impact of cultural differences on media content, consumption, and effects

Aspect	Collectivist cultures	Individualist cultures
Media Content	Media in collectivist cultures emphasizes group harmony, respect for tradition, and collective identity. Storylines and advertisements highlight community, family values, and social responsibilities (Xu, 2018). For example, Middle Eastern media often preserves traditional values and norms, reflecting respect for elders and authority figures (South China Morning Post, 2024)	Media in individualist cultures focuses on personal achievement, independence, and self-expression. Content frequently challenges traditional norms and promotes innovation and personal narratives. Advertisements often celebrate individual accomplishments, freedom of choice, and personal rights (Xu, 2018). For example, Australian media highlights personal success and individuality in storytelling and advertising (Bögenhold & Naz, 2018; Karmali, 2024)
Media Consumption	Media consumption in collectivist cultures is often a shared activity, with families or communities watching television or movies together. Local productions are generally preferred over foreign media, reflecting cultural values and promoting a sense of belonging and community (Xu, 2018). For instance, during Ramadan, Middle Eastern families gather to watch special drama series that emphasize cultural traditions and togetherness (South China Morning Post, 2024)	In individualist cultures, media consumption is highly personalized, catering to individual preferences through on-demand streaming services. Viewers select content based on personal tastes, with a diverse range of options including foreign media, reflecting the broad interests of audiences (Xu, 2018). In Australia, it is common for individuals to binge-watch shows like “Neighbours” or “MasterChef Australia” alone, highlighting the importance of personal choice and convenience (Pew Research Center, 2014). diverse range of options including foreign media, which reflects the broad interests of audiences (Xu, 2018). In Australia, it is common for individuals to binge-watch shows like “Neighbours” or “MasterChef Australia” alone, highlighting the importance of personal choice and convenience (Pew Research Center, 2014)
Media Effects	In collectivist cultures, media reinforces social norms and encourages conformity, often through public service announcements and educational programs that promote collective behaviours and social responsibility (Xu, 2018). Positive portrayals of collective efforts and community solidarity strengthen social bonds and a sense of unity. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Middle Eastern media campaigns emphasized community well-being and collective actions for the greater good (South China Morning Post, 2024)	In individualist cultures, media empowers individuals, promoting self-efficacy, personal growth, and critical thinking. Inspirational stories and self-help content are popular, encouraging audiences to challenge established norms and pursue personal goals (Xu, 2018). For instance, the “This Girl Can” campaign in Australia empowers women to embrace physical activity without fear of judgement, reflecting the individualist emphasis on self-acceptance and personal empowerment (Pew Research Center, 2014)

(continued)

Table 7.1 (continued)

Aspect	Collectivist cultures	Individualist cultures
Media Consumption Examples	Middle Eastern television often involves communal viewing, especially during cultural events like Ramadan, reinforcing the collectivist emphasis on family and shared experiences. Shows like “Bab Al-Hara” highlight cultural traditions and communal values (South China Morning Post, 2024)	In Australia, media consumption is often solitary, with a preference for personalized content accessed via streaming services like Netflix. This aligns with the individualistic culture’s focus on personal entertainment and choice, allowing viewers to engage with content independently on devices like smartphones and tablets (Pew Research Center, 2014)
Campaign Examples	In collectivist cultures, media campaigns focus on community and national solidarity, such as Saudi Arabia’s disaster response campaigns that emphasize collective action and adherence to safety measures (South China Morning Post, 2024). These campaigns reflect the collectivist values of resilience and shared responsibility, prioritizing community over individual needs (Block & Chen, 2024)	Empowerment campaigns in individualist cultures, like “This Girl Can” in Australia, focus on personal empowerment and overcoming societal barriers. Such campaigns highlight personal stories and promote individual confidence, aligning with the individualist values of self-efficacy and personal growth (Pew Research Center, 2014)
Global Brands Adaptation	Global brands often adapt their messaging to reflect local cultural values. For example, Coca-Cola advertisements in the Middle East emphasize family togetherness and respect for traditions, aligning with collectivist values during special occasions like Ramadan (Block & Chen, 2024)	In individualist cultures, Coca-Cola ads often focus on personal enjoyment and leisure activities, such as sharing a Coke at barbecues or sporting events. This reflects the individualistic culture’s emphasis on personal freedom, casual social gatherings, and individual enjoyment (Block & Chen, 2024; Karmali, 2024)

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Chapter 8

Revisiting the Rise of Religious Populism: The Spiral of Silence in Post-Reformasi Indonesian Higher Education Environment



Hangga Fathana and Karina Utami Dewi

8.1 Introduction and Approach

The demise of President Soeharto's administration (New Order) in 1998 marked the beginning of tumultuous years characterised by the emergence of religious populism in Indonesian politics. As the New Order maintained an authoritarian military dictatorship throughout much of its regime, its collapse transformed the country into a battleground for contesting ideologies, with populist Islam emerging as one of the prominent contenders. More recently, religious populism has garnered increased attention within the country, extending from national politics to grassroots civil society. The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) had been in the spotlight, acting as one of pressure groups and hard-line Islamist movements to reframe the national political discourse (Barton et al., 2021).

In national politics, Indonesia disbanded the FPI in 2020 under the administration of President Joko Widodo. The organisation was dismissed on charges that some of its key members were involved in terrorism. However, the Indonesian government's claim that the disbandment of the FPI has led to political stability should be approached with caution. (Republika Online, 2021).

Demand for religious populism has not yet perished, as the driving factors still prevail, even stronger in civilisational communities through the uses of cyberspace (Yilmaz & Barton, 2021). Interestingly, populist waves have also emerged within the higher education sector. Initial research by the Setara Institute reveals that hard-line religious movements thrive in the Indonesian higher education environment (Setara

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Institute, 2019). This trend poses potential risks of transforming into intolerance, radicalism, and even terrorism. The research further highlights that 10 leading universities in Indonesia are susceptible to these populist influences. It also raises awareness about the broader implications for Indonesia's higher education environment, considering the country is home to more than 4,500 higher education institutions.

Over the years, research on religious populism in Indonesia has focused on the identification of probable driving factors and how it is distinguished from the other streams of populism. One argues that the emerging religious populism in Indonesia has little relations with the interests of neoliberal economic elites (Hadiz, 2018a, 2018b). Others argue that the historical trajectory of electoral politics contributes to the current phenomenon, highlighting the ups and downs of Islamic groups in representing Indonesian muslims (Adiwilaga et al., 2019).

The existing research also strives to map the ideological quadrant of Indonesia's religious populism. While some believe that global religious populism very much relates to the right-wing variant of populism, others argue that Indonesia's religious populism is relatively unique and distinctive from any other variants (Hara, 2018; Öniş & Kutlay, 2020).

Building upon this existing literature, this chapter revisits the phenomenon of religious populism within Indonesia's higher education environment by adopting the lens of the spiral of silence theory. In doing so, it addresses gaps in existing research, which has predominantly focused on national politics or the broader societal impacts of religious populism. This chapter challenges prevailing conclusions, such as those of the Setara Institute, by incorporating fresh perspectives drawn from a survey conducted at one of Indonesia's leading religious-based universities. Through this survey, the chapter critically examines how religious populism manifests in higher education and reconsiders claims about its influence, particularly the extent to which it dominates academic settings.

The chapter is guided by the central research question: **how does the spiral of silence explain the perceived prominence of religious populism in Indonesia's higher education environment?** To address this, the analysis focuses on key elements of the theory, including fear of social isolation, monitoring of public opinion, and the role of media. These elements serve as lenses to reinterpret the prominence of religious populism and provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play.

First, the fear of social isolation plays a prominent role in explaining the claim that Indonesian university students experience peer pressure in expressing their religious practices. This is due to the significant influence of social media and peer groups on students' religiosity (Setara Institute, 2019). Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe that social media has proven to be a robust platform for expressing religious populism in Indonesia (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020).

Second, there is also significant relevance observed in the monitoring of public opinion to the case study. According to the Setara Institute, 40.9% of survey respondents exhibited a preference for practising an exclusive form of religiosity in public, which leads them to disengage from broader public opinion. However, this number also indicates that the majority of respondents practise their religion

with a moderate and inclusive approach. Unlike those who practise religion with an exclusive approach, a broader group of Indonesian moderate Muslims prefers to use a structural approach to promote moderate Islam, rather than openly expressing their opinions on social media (Akmaliah et al., 2022; Alvian & Ardhani, 2023; Nasir & Rijal, 2021). This structural approach includes promoting religious moderation through governmental policies, university curricula, and the establishment of public institutes.

Third, the media has played a role in contributing to the perception of religious populism within the Indonesian higher education environment. In 2019, when the Setara Institute disclosed its research findings, mass media played an influential role in exaggerating the perspective, creating the impression that most Indonesian universities are prone to radicalism and religious populism. A similar reaction was observed on social media, where discussions and debates on these matters were somewhat inevitable.

This chapter is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between religious populism and higher education in Indonesia through the lens of the spiral of silence theory. It begins with an examination of the socio-political and historical context surrounding the rise of religious populism in the post-reformasi era. Subsequently, it explores the presence of religious populism in higher education, focusing on critical themes such as fear of social isolation, the monitoring of public opinion, and the influence of media. By addressing these elements and incorporating survey data, the chapter aims to offer a perspective that not only revisits but also challenges prevailing findings on religious populism in Indonesian universities.

8.2 Religious Populism in Indonesian Context

Islam has been an important part of Indonesia, as one of the countries with the highest Muslim population in Indonesia. During the new order era under President Soeharto, expression of political Islam was largely suppressed, despite the fact that Islamic groups such as Masyumi were significant in Soeharto's rise to presidency to replace Soekarno in the 1960s. However, the existence of political Islam at that time was highly limited, as it was considered threatening Soeharto's attempt to preserve absolute power (Wijaya, 2015).

By the end of Soeharto's regime during the 1990s, political Islam began to show its strengthened power, mostly because Soeharto's more open and accommodative approach towards Islamist groups, as well as his waning popularity and its eventual collapse that open more opportunities for Islamic groups to declare their existence (Machmudi, 2008). Although politically suppressed, these religious Islamic groups were still developed during Soeharto's era, and after the fall of Soeharto, Islam has been used as an effective tool to undermine political rivals, especially those with pluralists that are concerned about the threat of fundamentalism that would threaten Pancasila (Suryadinata, 2018).

The fall of Soeharto and the birth of Reformasi, brought forward democratisation in Indonesia, with one of the effects being freedom of expression, not only in a liberal way, but also in a conservative and fundamentalist way. Civil society groups such as FPI (Front Pembela Islam/Islamic Defender Front) are argued to instrumentalize religious discourse by emphasising ideas of good muslim society versus evil. This momentum marks a civilizational turn in Indonesian Islamist populism, when groups such as FPI continue to gain political bargaining and power (Yilmaz et al., 2023).

Islamic parties also prospered in the post-new order era, one of them is Partai Keadilan (PK) or Justice Party, founded in 1998 and in 2002 evolved into Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) or Prosperous Justice Party. The party played a significant role after Reformasi, appealing to educated and conservative Muslims with its promotion of good and Islamic ethics. Since election 2004, the party consistently gained around 7% of votes every election and even up to 11% in the 2024 election (CNBC Indonesia, 2024; Juwita, 2024).

The party and movement contributed to the broader Islamization of Indonesian society, promoting conservative Islamic values in public and private life. This included advocating for Islamic dress codes, Sharia-based regulations in local governments, and other policies reflecting Islamic norms. PKS faced challenges in promoting these values, including accusations of hypocrisy as it struggles to balance its ideological roots with the demands of pragmatic politics, as well as concerns that it jeopardises Indonesia's pluralistic and Pancasila-based framework (Machmudi, 2008).

Other than the rise of Islamic civil society groups and Islamic political parties, the decision of decentralised politics in post-Reformasi Indonesia, also allows an adoption of a more conservative regulation based on Islamic values, such as Sharia law. Other than that, the implementation of these regulations also takes place in various areas in Indonesia even without the Islamic law. In Aceh, for example, one of the implementation of the law is criminalization of consensual sexual relations between unmarried couple, with caning as a form punishment (Amnesty International, 2016).

During the presidential election in 2014, Joko Widodo ran as a candidate supported by PDI Perjuangan (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle). His opponent, Prabowo, utilised religious tones during his campaign and framed Joko Widodo as a candidate that is not religious enough to lead Indonesia. Supporters of Prabowo even spread rumours about Joko Widodo as a Christian and has a strong tie with Indonesian Communist Party, a strong party in 1960s before it was banned during Soeharto's era, and was seen as a threat for Islam in Indonesia. Numerous hardliner Islamist groups showed their strong endorsement to Prabowo as they feared the rumours of Joko Widodo being a Christian and communist are true. Although Joko Widodo still won, the support for Prabowo from the conservative Islamist groups was massive, and it underlined a rising trend of Islamic narratives within the political context in Indonesia (Widian et al., 2023).

Religious populism in Indonesia began to take an even stronger emphasis during the 2016–2017 gubernatorial campaign of Jakarta. In 2016, Jakarta's governor at that time, Basuki Tjahja Purnama or often called "Ahok", made a statement referencing Qur'an offended Muslim groups in Indonesia. He was also running as an

incumbent for Jakarta's gubernatorial election for 2017, against Anies Baswedan, who was running a campaign on religious populism, riding on the momentum of majority Muslims' fear against the non-Muslim leader. Public protests broke out and demanded Ahok to be prosecuted on the grounds of religious blasphemy. (Global Freedom of Expression, 2017).

This movement is called the first "Aksi Bela Islam" and was supported by a majority of hard liner Islamists in Indonesia, such as FPI, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and The Salafis. Majority of these groups also supported Anies Baswedan as the governor in the 2017 election, which later emerged victorious. On the other hand, in the same year of the election, Ahok was indicted by the court on the blasphemy case, and sentenced to two years in prison (Suryana, 2023).

Another significant event that influenced the rise of religious populism is during 2019, a rerun of the 2014 presidential election took place between incumbent Joko Widodo against Prabowo who decided to run again as presidential candidate. The religious narrative used by Prabowo in his campaign in 2014 was even more emphasised in the 2019 election, by showcasing his closeness to FPI leader, Habib Rizieq, and modified his campaign rallies by including passionate chanting of prayers. In the 2019 election, once again Prabowo claimed Jokowi as an enemy of the Muslim community and as a threat to pious Muslims and Islamist organisations, playing on the fear of the ever growing conservative society of the country (Warburton, 2020; Widian et al., 2023).

8.3 Influence of Religious Populism in Higher Education

The rise of religious populism in Indonesia is in line with the flourishing influence of social media. Indonesian are among the most active users of social media, despite the existing digital divide and several areas in the country. This phenomenon aligns with the development of studies on religion and the internet, where the first wave of research in the early 2000s aimed to document the rise of religion online. Since then, the second and the third wave of the research shifted to analyse the implications of new media technologies, including social media on religion, with particular emphasis on rituals, community, identity, and authority (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020).

The spread of religious practice and teaching through social media is considered as a form of *da'wa* (spreading of Islamic values and teachings) by many Muslims. This phenomenon is also effectively used by the populist groups to spread their messages, recruit members, and organise activities. The use of social media serves as a critical tool for these movements to go beyond the mainstream media, as the public trust on the traditional media keeps declining. Not only that, the use of social media also greatly helps these groups to directly engage the public and easily frame the narrative (Yilmaz & Barton, 2021).

With more than 185 million users of social media in Indonesia (Howe, 2023), and with the rise of religious populism in the past ten years keeps increasing, one of the significant entities in Indonesian society that could be affected by religious populism

is higher education institutions. Research by Setara Institute in 2019 showed that social media is among one of the factors that influence the religiosity typology of students in 10 universities in Indonesia, although it is not the most significant. The research concluded that in all layers of religiosity there is the potential for moderate groups within these universities' students to be eroded towards the negative pendulum (becoming more conservative, exclusive, and formalist). This article conducted another survey related to these findings by SETARA Institute to provide an alternative to the aforementioned conclusions regarding the religious populism phenomenon within the students of higher education institutions in Indonesia.

8.4 Findings of the Survey

The case studies, presented through a survey conducted at one of Indonesia's most prominent religious-based universities, aim to revisit prevailing assumptions about the dynamics of religiosity, social inclusion, and religious populism in higher education. By examining these themes, the study seeks to provide nuanced insights into how religious identity and expression interact with broader societal and institutional contexts.

The respondents, representing a diverse cross-section of students, offered perspectives that not only individual experiences but also trends indicative of broader societal patterns. The analysis recognises the complexities and variations within these findings, while also striving to contribute to academic and practical discussions on religion and inclusion.

The survey results underscore the centrality of religion in the daily lives of respondents, with a majority rating its importance as "very important" (5 out of 5). The mean score of 4.91 reflects the significant role of religion in shaping personal and communal interactions among students.

Furthermore, most respondents reported feeling comfortable practising their religion publicly on campus, with an average comfort score of 4.56, where 75% expressed being "comfortable" or "very comfortable". This suggests that universities generally provide a supportive environment for religious expression, though isolated instances of discomfort highlight potential barriers for minority groups or less dominant viewpoints.

More importantly, social media emerged as a critical factor in shaping religious perspective. A majority of respondents acknowledged its significant role, with a mean agreement score of 4.23. However, this engagement is tempered by caution, as over 65% of respondents indicated that they refrain from sharing religious opinions on social media due to fear of social reactions.

This dynamic aligns with the spiral of silence theory, where the fear of social isolation or public backlash inhibits individuals from openly expressing their views. These findings suggest that while social media facilitates opportunities for religious discourse, it also reflects societal pressures that can constrain open dialogue.

Slightly more than half of the respondents (52%) reported witnessing or experiencing forms of religious populism on campus. These incidents often involved exclusivist messaging during religious events or peer-led campaigns promoting strict interpretations of religious practice.

However, the overall perception of religious diversity on campuses was moderately positive, with an average score of 3.63. This indicates that while religious populism is present, it does not dominate the broader campus experience. These findings align with previous studies suggesting that religious populism in Indonesian universities mirrors broader societal trends without defining the overall campus environment (Yilmaz & Barton, 2021).

Peer pressure to conform to specific religious practices was reported as minimal, with a low average score of 1.23. Despite this, 13.7% of respondents indicated experiencing feelings of social isolation or exclusion based on their religious beliefs or practices. This reflects a nuanced dynamic of inclusion, where explicit pressure is rare, but subtler forms of exclusion persist, especially for those holding minority or dissenting views.

On the broader question of religion's role in governance, respondents demonstrated strong support for integrating religious values into formal institutions, with an average agreement score of 4.06. However, their views were more divided on whether current frameworks sufficiently accommodate these values, with a mean score of 3.07, reflecting ongoing debates about the role of religion in public policy (Nasir & Rijal, 2021).

Another significant finding was the preference for open and inclusive engagement with religious sources. Respondents favoured accessing diverse perspectives, with mean score 3.76, over homogeneous and exclusive interactions, with mean score 2.61. This trend indicates a broader inclination towards pluralism, even amidst the influence of exclusivist narratives.

Additionally, respondents balanced strong individual religious identities with an emphasis on the private nature of religion. The mean score for strong religious identity was 3.83, while the agreement that religion is a private matter received a higher score of 4.00. This balance highlights a nuanced perspective where individuals value personal religiosity but resist collective imposition.

Overall, the findings illustrate a complex interplay between religion, social inclusion, and the spiral of silence within Indonesian universities. While religiosity remains deeply embedded in student identities, the influence of religious populism is moderated by tendencies towards pluralism and a generally inclusive campus culture. Social media amplifies both religious engagement and caution, serving as a platform for discourse but also reflecting societal pressures that restrict openness. These insights, with their empirical grounding, provide a nuanced understanding of religious dynamics in higher education, complementing theoretical discussions on religious populism and the spiral of silence.

8.5 Spiral of Silence: Theoretical Interpretation

The spiral of silence theory, developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974), provides a valuable lens for understanding several patterns emerging from the survey data. The theory posits that individuals often refrain from expressing opinions if they perceive themselves to be in the minority, driven by a fear of social isolation. This dynamic is particularly evident in the survey's findings on social media behaviour and campus experiences of religious populism.

A significant portion of respondents (over 65%) admitted to withholding religious opinion on social media due to fear of negative reactions. This hesitation underscores the influence of perceived majority narratives and aligns with the spiral of silence framework, where dissenters self-censor to avoid criticism. Social media platforms, by amplifying dominant religious narratives, create a feedback loop that reinforces the perception of consensus. As Solahudin and Fakhruroji note, these platforms often operate as echo chambers, limiting the visibility of diverse perspectives and stifling open discourse on sensitive topics like religion and populism.

The suppression of minority voices is also reflected in campus dynamics. While the survey revealed that 52% of respondents encountered or observed forms of religious populism, the average perception of campus diversity remained moderately positive (3.63 out of 5). This disparity suggests that while exclusivist religious narratives are present, they may dominate public discourse in ways that silence or marginalise alternative views. Yilmaz and Barton (2021) argue that religious populism in Indonesia often leverages public spaces to project dominance, creating environments where dissenting perspectives are discouraged.

The spiral of silence also emerges in subtle forms of social exclusion. Although explicit peer pressure to conform to religious practices was rated low, with mean score 1.23, 13.7% of respondents reported feeling socially isolated or excluded because of their beliefs. This finding highlights the fear of isolation, central to Noelle-Neumann's theory, can operate even in relatively inclusive environments, discouraging open dialogue among those who feel their views deviate from the perceived norm.

The survey also revealed a preference for open and inclusive engagement with religious sources, compared to homogenous and exclusive interactions. However, in contexts where exclusivist narratives dominate, individuals favouring pluralistic engagement may hesitate to voice their preferences. Akmaliah et al. (2022) suggest that the dominance of conservative or exclusivist views within certain institutions can further inhibit pluralistic discourse, reinforcing the cycle of silence and conformity.

Social media plays a dual role in this dynamic. While it offers opportunities for engagement, it also amplifies the fear of backlash, limiting expression and entrenching the visibility of dominant narratives. Respondents rated social media's influence on religious views highly, yet their reluctance to post openly indicates the constraints imposed by societal pressures. This phenomenon, as noted by Solahudin and Fakhruroji (2020), illustrates how the structure of digital platforms can both enable and restrict discourse, perpetuating the spiral of silence in contentious areas like religion and populism.

Overall, the spiral of silence theory offers a compelling framework for interpreting the survey findings. Dominant religious or populist narratives, whether on campuses or online, create environments where alternative voices are suppressed by fear of exclusion. This self-reinforcing cycle not only entrenches prevailing perspectives but also underscores the need for intentional efforts to create inclusive spaces that empower diverse expressions of belief. By addressing these dynamics, institutions can foster a more open and pluralistic discourse within Indonesian higher education.

8.6 Revisiting Religious Populism in Indonesian Universities

The findings of this survey challenge some of the conclusions drawn by the Setara Institute's, 2019 research, which highlighted the prevalence and influence of exclusivist ideologies in Indonesian universities.

First, while much of the prevailing discourse emphasises the significant presence of exclusivist ideologies in Indonesian universities, the findings reveal a more balanced and nuanced reality. Although 52% of respondents acknowledged observing forms of religious populism, the broader campus experience does not appear dominated by these narratives. The moderate perception of religious diversity reflects a dual reality where exclusivist trends coexist with inclusive practices. This suggests that the dominance attributed to exclusivist ideologies in many accounts might be overstated in certain contexts.

Second, the survey findings highlight a strong preference among students for open and inclusive engagement with diverse religious sources compared to homogenous interactions. This preference contrasts with common portrayals of campuses as overwhelmingly influenced by exclusivist organisations and activities. The data suggests that many students actively seek pluralistic engagement, demonstrating a significant undercurrent of inclusivity that counters the notion of exclusivism holding unchallenged sway within universities. This points to a more dynamic landscape where pluralistic preferences provide a counterbalance to exclusivist tendencies.

Third, the findings emphasise student agency in navigating religious dynamics. While much of the focus has been on institutional and organisational influences driving exclusivist behaviour, this research highlights the resilience of individual attitudes. Many respondents feel comfortable practising openly on campus, and a significant portion view religion as a private matter. This underscores an emphasis on personal choice and autonomy, suggesting that students are not merely passive participants in a system coexisting with exclusivist ideologies but are active agents in shaping their own religious experiences and interactions.

Fourth, another key insight lies in the role of social media. While it is often overlooked in discussions about campus religious dynamics, the findings reveal social media as a critical arena for engaging with religious ideas. Respondents acknowledged its significant role in shaping their religious perspectives, but they also noted

reluctance to express dissenting opinions online due to fear of backlash. This dual nature of social media as both a platform for amplifying dominant narratives and a space where dissenting voices are constrained adds complexity to the understanding of how religious populism operates both on campuses and in broader digital spaces.

Finally, the findings challenge the assumption that religious populism is a pervasive and uncontested force within Indonesian universities. Instead, they present a more complex and balanced view. While exclusivist narratives are visible, they coexist with a strong preference for pluralism and inclusivity, as well as significant student agency. This dual reality suggests that universities are not monolithic spaces defined solely by religious populism but are instead dynamic environments where diverse perspectives and practices intersect. By emphasising these nuances, this research refines and enriches the existing discourse, offering a deeper understanding of the interplay between religious populism and inclusivity in higher education.

8.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the dynamics of religious populism within Indonesian higher education through the lens of the spiral of silence theory. By analysing survey data from one of Indonesia's most prominent religious-based universities, the study revisited prevailing assumptions about the dominance of exclusivist narratives. While religious populism is present, the findings reveal a more complex and nuanced reality where pluralistic tendencies, student agency, and inclusivity coexist with exclusivist trends.

The survey results demonstrated that while 52% of respondents observed forms of religious populism, this does not define the entirety of the campus experience. Moderate perceptions of diversity (mean score: 3.63) and a strong preference for inclusive engagement with diverse religious sources (mean score: 3.76) highlight the resilience of pluralism within these spaces. Furthermore, many students feel empowered to balance their religious identities with personal autonomy, as reflected in their comfort practising religion openly (mean score: 4.56) and their belief in religion as a private matter (mean score: 4.00).

These findings challenge generalised portrayals of religious populism as an uncontested force within Indonesian universities. Instead, they depict a dual reality where inclusivity and exclusivism intersect, creating dynamic environments that cannot be reduced to a single narrative. By revisiting and refining existing perspectives, this chapter contributes a more balanced understanding of the interplay between religious populism, social inclusion, and individual expression in higher education.

Looking forward, these insights have practical implications for fostering pluralism within academic settings. Universities can play a critical role in supporting diverse voices and mitigating the spiral of silence by promoting digital literacy, creating safe spaces for dialogue, and integrating values of inclusion into institutional policies. Additionally, further research could explore how similar dynamics operate in

other contexts, offering comparative perspectives that deepen our understanding of religion, populism, and the public sphere.

In sum, this chapter underscores the importance of examining the complexities and contradictions inherent in religious discourse within higher education. By addressing both structural and individual dynamics, it provides a foundation for ongoing conversations about the challenges and possibilities of fostering pluralism in an era of polarised narratives.

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Chapter 9

Conclusion: Revisiting the Spiral of Silence in the Social Media Era—A Global Perspective



Maggie Jiang and Lisa Cluett

The exploration of the Spiral of Silence in the context of social media across various cultural and geopolitical settings presents a multifaceted view of how public opinion is shaped, navigated, and suppressed in contemporary digital spaces. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's seminal theory, first proposed in 1974, continues to resonate today, especially in light of the rapid growth of social media platforms. These platforms, which were initially thought to democratize public discourse, have instead introduced new challenges and nuances to the ways in which individuals express or withhold their opinions.

Throughout this book, we have examined the evolving relevance of the Spiral of Silence theory across different national contexts, each with its unique socio-political dynamics and cultural influences. From the vibrant yet polarizing political discourse in India to the social media engagement surrounding the controversial divorce debate in the Philippines, the findings underscore the complex interplay between digital platforms, self-censorship, and public expression.

9.1 A Complex Web of Influence: Social Media and Public Opinion

Social media has created a vast and dynamic space where individuals from diverse backgrounds can share their views on contentious topics, ranging from politics to social issues. However, the promise of unfiltered dialogue has been tempered by

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the emergence of echo chambers, algorithmic biases, and the pervasive fear of social isolation. As detailed in Chapter 2, social media has not necessarily led to the empowerment of marginalized voices, as originally anticipated. Instead, the ease of creating content and sharing opinions has amplified the spiral of silence, as individuals are more likely to withdraw from participating in online discussions when they perceive their views as being in the minority.

In the case of India, the diverse cultural, regional, and political landscape plays a significant role in shaping the decision-making process of social media users when it comes to expressing their views. As Chapter 2 highlighted, family dynamics, caste systems, and religious sentiments often become intertwined with online interactions, creating a complex environment in which individuals may self-censor to avoid potential social, legal, or professional repercussions. The rise of platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter has not led to a more open and democratic conversation but rather reinforced existing power structures and inequalities. The concerns about privacy, political backlash, and social ostracism keep users from fully expressing their opinions, particularly when these opinions challenge the dominant discourse.

Chapter 3 expanded on this, showing how social media's inherently social nature can exacerbate feelings of exclusion. The introduction of cyberbullying and online harassment further magnifies the spiral of silence, as those subjected to abuse retreat from the public sphere, silencing their dissenting views. The theory that public opinion is shaped by dominant voices is particularly relevant in the case of marginalized groups, where the act of self-censorship is often a survival mechanism in hostile digital spaces. The dynamic between self-censorship and cyberbullying is crucial to understanding the way silence operates in the digital age, as it not only silences the victim but also discourages others from expressing support.

9.2 Social Media Engagement: Amplification or Suppression of Opinion?

The case of the divorce debate in the Philippines, presented in Chapter 4, highlights the significant role that social media engagement metrics play in shaping public opinion. Social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram offer real-time feedback on users' posts, creating an environment where engagement levels—such as likes, shares, and comments—serve as indicators of the popularity or acceptance of particular viewpoints. This has profound implications for how individuals decide whether to speak up or remain silent on contentious issues.

In the Philippines, where divorce remains a highly debated policy issue, social media users overwhelmingly engaged with content that reflected the majority opinion, particularly in favor of the legalization of divorce. This behavior, as discussed in Chapter 4, suggests that engagement metrics act as a form of social feedback, guiding users' perceptions of the "climate of opinion." Those with minority or unpopular views about divorce may refrain from engaging or posting their opinions

to avoid potential backlash, further reinforcing the spiral of silence. The findings from this chapter illustrate how the dynamics of social media platforms, including algorithm-driven content curation and the feedback loop created by engagement metrics, can either amplify the majority opinion or suppress dissenting voices.

9.3 The Role of Algorithms and Content Moderation

A significant factor that emerged across the chapters is the role of social media algorithms in shaping the “climate of opinion.” As platforms increasingly rely on engagement metrics to determine which content is promoted, algorithms tend to favor content that garners high levels of interaction. This dynamic creates a feedback loop that disproportionately amplifies majority opinions, while minority perspectives struggle to gain visibility. The chapter on Italy further illustrates this, where social media platforms, intended as spaces for connection and dialogue, inadvertently foster environments where dissenting voices are marginalized. This issue is exacerbated by the rise of “echo chambers,” where users are exposed primarily to views they already agree with, reinforcing their beliefs and further inhibiting the expression of alternative viewpoints.

Moreover, content moderation practices on social media platforms contribute to the complexity of the spiral of silence. As platforms implement policies to remove harmful content, including hate speech and disinformation, users are often caught in the tension between wanting to express their opinions freely and adhering to platform guidelines. In some instances, individuals may self-censor to avoid content removal or the risk of being banned from a platform, further suppressing the diversity of voices in online spaces.

9.4 Moving Forward: A Global Perspective

In light of the diverse findings presented in this book, it is clear that the Spiral of Silence theory requires adaptation and extension to account for the nuances of social media communication. While the theory remains valuable in explaining the dynamics of self-censorship and opinion suppression, the impact of social media on public discourse is more complex than Noelle-Neumann could have anticipated. The digital age has introduced new factors, such as anonymity, algorithmic content promotion, and feedback loops, that shape the way individuals navigate public expression.

A global perspective, as demonstrated through the cross-cultural case studies in this volume, is essential for understanding the multifaceted nature of public opinion in the social media era. From the vibrant digital landscapes of India to the polarized political discourse in the United States, it is evident that social media platforms are not neutral spaces but are deeply embedded within the socio-political and cultural contexts in which they operate. The interplay between social norms, political

climates, and digital platforms shapes users' willingness to speak out, fostering an environment where minority opinions may be stifled or marginalized.

9.5 Final Thoughts

As we look to the future, it is crucial to consider the evolving nature of social media and its impact on public discourse. While digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for individuals to express their views, they also pose significant challenges for the representation of diverse opinions. The spiral of silence remains a potent force in shaping the “climate of opinion,” but its manifestations in the digital age require a more nuanced understanding. As researchers and scholars continue to study this phenomenon, it will be essential to explore the role of algorithms, content moderation, and social media engagement in fostering a more inclusive and diverse public sphere. Ultimately, the key challenge will be to ensure that social media platforms evolve into spaces that encourage open, respectful dialogue, where all voices—whether in the majority or the minority—can be heard.