

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

Opinion Expression in Hostile Opinion Climate: An Examination of Exposure to Political Hate among Facebook Users in Pakistan

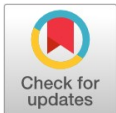
Naila Rafique ^{1*}, Noshina Saleem ²

^{1,2} University of Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

Abstract— This study investigates the prevalence of the spiral of silence on social media regarding political hate speech. The study assumes that social media users estimate opinion climate on Facebook before expressing their opinion, when they are exposed to political hate speech. The research involved a quantitative analysis via survey. The sample comprised of undergraduate students of Political Science and Media & Communication Studies from two universities i.e., International Islamic University, Islamabad, and University of Punjab, Lahore. A total sample of 250 students was drawn through a systematic random sampling technique. Analytical strategies were based on descriptive statistics and regression analysis. Results indicated that most respondents are exposed to online political hate speech. Further, significant support was also found for applying the spiral of silence in the context of social media.

Index Terms— Spiral of Silence, Social Media, Hate Speech, Opinion Climate, Fear of Isolation

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Introduction

Nowadays, opinion expression on social media is becoming a principal area of scholarly investigations [Winter and Neubaum \(2016\)](#). Researchers are interested in exploring the conditions under which people decide whether the opinion should be expressed or not. Noelle-Neumann presented a framework to describe such a phenomenon in 1974. She undertook the notion that people tend to be silent if they find themselves among minority opinion holders, but they become vocal if they perceive that they fall among majority opinion holders. Neumann termed her unique approach as the spiral of silence [\(Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993\)](#). Core assumptions of the theory include fear of isolation, assessment of opinion climate, and willingness to express an opinion. Enormous studies support the presence of this effect on social networking sites [\(Ho & McLeod, 2008; N. Y. Lee & Kim, 2014; Woong Yun & Park, 2011\)](#).

Although social media serves as one of the exclusive platforms for social interactions, political deliberations [\(Velasquez & Rojas, 2017\)](#), and civic engagement on a global level, nevertheless it is also responsible for facilitating certain harmful and negative conducts such as hate speech [\(Ben-David & Fernández, 2016\)](#). In this regard, Facebook is considered as an appropriate tool for facilitating citizens' engagement in political affairs, elections, and political campaigns via expressing viewpoints and sometimes passing hate or derogatory comments towards the opposing political party [\(Jamieson, Shirlow, & Grounds, 2010; Paz, Montero-Díaz, & Moreno-Delgado, 2020; Young, Holbert, & Jamieson, 2014\)](#). The phenomenon of online political hate speech is being practiced since 1995, when the very first

*Email: naila.rafique@iiu.edu.pk

hate site emerged on the Internet (Levin, 2002). Studies show that social media is popular among youth for political communication. Electoral campaigns are run on Facebook instead of political wards (Christensen, 2013).

The evolution of social networking sites has given people more liberty to deliberate their political views and ideas publicly without any constriction on several interactive forums such as Twitter, Blogs, Facebook and Instagram, etc. Nevertheless, Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory also prevails in social media. Despite freedom of expression on SNS, people are still not allowed to raise their voices on some sensitive issues concerning a few political matters (Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010).

Political hate speech is disseminated by both political parties as well as by the organized groups of their followers in an online setting. The prime objective of such hate groups is to engage like-minded people in hate speech against political rivals. The social networking sites have further facilitated the hate groups in becoming more influential and visible to reach a larger audience for the propagation of hate speech. For instance, there has been a substantial increase (66%) in the number of online hate groups from 2000 to 2010 (Potok & McCabe, 2010). Pakistan is a developing country. With a population above 225.1 million, it is the fifth-most populated country on the globe (meter, 2021). Most of its population consists of young people. According to United Nations Population Fund Report (2016-17), the youth is 64% of the total population of Pakistan. The rate of internet consumers was 62 million in 2020 (Datareportal, 2021). According to Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan (2016), 79% of internet users are engaged with Facebook for political activities. These activities have included entertainment, social interaction, political participation, etc., since the general elections 2013. Facebook is exposed to unpleasant political debates and discussions. Political leaders and the general public target opponent political affiliations with derogatory expressions. BARGAD (2018) states that social media facilitates discourses of political hate in Pakistan. The extensive use of social media boosts hates speech in Pakistan (Haque, 2014).

The Rationale of the Study

With a low literacy rate, i.e., 57% (News, 2017), and high internet use i.e., the youth of Pakistan is exposed to political hate deliberations on Facebook. Most of the people merely read hate comments and silently observe the political hate speech on social media, yet they are not willing to express their views on that issue as they are uncertain in expressing their opinions/views or political hate in a digital environment (Zhang, 2015). The majority of the scholars have recognized fear of isolation as the sole cause of not expressing personal views on social media (Hayes & Matthes, 2017). Spiral of Silence's application and particular impact on social media is hardly ever tested on computer-mediated communication (McDevitt, Kioussis, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2003). This groundwork authenticates this study. Because there is little, if any, published research using the Spiral of Silence on political hate speech, this study addresses a void in the contemporary research on opinion expression on social networking sites.

Significance of Study

Social networking sites, particularly Facebook is gaining recognition in Pakistan and various spheres have been created on social media whereby individuals express political hate against the rival political parties and their followers Kaya and Bicen (2016). Considering this paradigm shift in hate speech expression from face-to-face to online mode, this study is significant both an academic and social perspective to investigate the presence of spiral of silence and political hate on Facebook. The findings of the study might be beneficial for communication scholars as well as for those who design, implement and evaluate political campaigns. This study is academically significant as it contributes to the existing literature on Spiral of Silence theory by examining its relevance on social media, specifically Facebook, on the expression of hate speech.

Objectives of Study

The research is carried out to achieve these objectives.

- To explore the identification of political hate speech among social media users.
- To explore the prevalence of the spiral of silence on social media.
- To investigate the difference in the willingness of opinion expression among Facebook users in the micro and macro composition of climate.

Literature Review

Noelle-Neumann was not the first scholar who conceptualized silence and its influence on the expression of opinion; instead, many communication scholars also studied this phenomenon previously (Hobbes, 1969; Tocqueville, 1978). The core concept of the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) lies in the assumption that "as social beings, most people are afraid of becoming isolated from their environment" (p. 144). This is named 'fear of social isolation. Fear of isolation is considered the most important constituent of the

theory (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004), because it is assumed that this postulate works as inspirational cause for entire practice” (Lin & Pfau, 2007). It is claimed that Facebook can create the same effect by creating a customized environment of social isolation. Despite freedom of expression on SNS, people are still not allowed to raise their voices on some sensitive issues concerning a few political matters (Lawrence et al., 2010). Being principal proposition of spiral of silence, the estimated majority opinion plays a key role in opinion expression on Facebook. Previous studies provide a piece of evidence for the presence of a relationship between the perceived majority opinion and opinion expression (Neuwirth, 2000; Salmon & Neuwirth, 1990; Scheufele, 1999).

Different scholars tested this theory from different approaches, with different concerns, and in different settings. The spiral of silence studies of gay bullying (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014), abortion (McDevitt et al., 2003), genetically modified food (Kim, Kim, & Oh, 2014), environmental activism (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005), political candidates (J. Lee, Choi, & Lee, 2004), and political debates (J. Lee et al., 2004).

Scholars discussed various aspects that can influence public opinion expression. Results generated a variety of criticism. Critique contains factors affecting opinion expression, the composition of opinion climate, etc.

Another important component, according to the critics, is the communication environment. The theory was also tested in an online setting to see if that would be sustained in a computer-mediated situation (Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001; Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo, 2007; Priest, 2006).

Research Questions

Research questions are exploratory; hence a descriptive data will be assessed with the help of these questions.

RQ1: Whether and up to what extent Facebook users identify and understand political hate speech in Pakistan?

RQ2: Which patterns of opinion expression do people prefer while expressing an opinion in hostile micro and macro-opinion climates on Facebook?

Research Hypothesis

H₁: Facebook users will be more likely to express their opinion on political hate speech if they believe that they fall in perceived majority opinion.

Methodology

The study focused on the content containing political hate uploaded or created on Facebook during the general elections of 2018. The study explored whether Facebook users in Pakistan identify political hate or not, and if they find any hateful or degrading material on their wall posted by friends or in any group where they know fewer users, how would they respond in terms of opinion expression. Data for this study is gathered through a survey. Questionnaires were distributed among students of the International Islamic University and the University of Punjab. These students were selected by systematic random sampling technique. 250 appropriate responses were analyzed in SPSS version 21.0 statistical software. Respondents of the study were presented with a hypothetical situation on Facebook in two different settings. One is termed as the microclimate of opinion, while the other is the macroclimate of opinion. The microclimate consists of close friends, family, acquaintances, and/or colleagues whom they frequently meet, while macro climate is composed of old pals, infrequently contacted acquaintances, or unknown people in a large group. The same situation was presented for both climates.

“Imagine during general elections 2018 you log in your timeline. The topic of the latest discussion is some content containing hatred or degrading text/ images/ animations/videos, which inappropriately attacks certain political persons/ parties/affiliations. From the comments and reactions through emoticons like anger 😡, like 👍, laughter 😂 etc. you can judge that most people do not support your point of view. In this kind of situation, some people would express their opinions, while others would not. What would you do?”

Operationalization of Key Terms

Microclimate of opinion:

Opinion climate comprised of micro circle i.e., friends, family, and significant others whom Facebooks user meets daily e.g., colleagues.

Macroclimate of opinion:

Opinion climate comprised of macro circle i.e., old pals, previous contemporaries, more secluded links, infrequently contacted people, and internet-only community.

Results

Questionnaires were distributed among 300 students, of which 250 were filled appropriately. For summarized demographic data of respondents see Table I.

Table I
Demographic Data of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	86	34.2%
	Female	164	56.7%
	Total	250	100.0%
Age	18-20	68	27.2%
	21-23	138	55.5%
	24-26	33	13.4%
	27-29	10	3.9%
	Total	250	100.0%
Native Province	Punjab	78	31%
	Sindh	70	28%
	KPK	45	18%
	Baluchistan	30	12%
	AJK	11	4.5%
	GB	16	6.5%
	Total	250	100.0
Political Affiliation	Yes	178	70.7%
	No	72	29.3%
	Total	250	100.0%

RQ1: Whether and up to what extent Facebook users identify and understand political hate speech in Pakistan?

To explore an understanding of political hate speech and its identification by Facebook users, demographic data is assessed from the issue-related variable construct, developed by [Haddock, Rothman, Reber, and Schwarz \(1999\)](#), [Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, and Carnot \(1993\)](#), and [Neuwirth et al. \(2007\)](#). This variable dealt with the amount of knowledge, interest, and importance shown by Facebook users in the survey.

Identification of Political Hate Speech

Table II
Identification and Understanding of Political Hate Speech

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Calling PMLN followers ‘patwari’ is not bad	16.0%	28.5%	22.8%	7.5%	17.5%	7.6%
Posting hateful or degrading content about politicians during general elections 2018 was freedom of expression	21.0%	29.7%	12.4%	15.3%	17.9%	3.5%
Dubbing videos of politicians in funny way is expression of political hate	8.8%	26.2%	14.7%	14.9%	29.0%	6.3%
Political hate is only abusive language against politicians	12.1%	30.5%	10.2%	15.1%	26.6%	5.2%
I know posting hate speech on Facebook is cyber crime	4.0%	15.6%	7.3%	15.6%	38.9%	18.5%
I know “youthya”, and “petwaari”, are terms to label political affiliation	5.3%	14.2%	8.5%	16.0%	41.6%	14.4%
Expressing political disagreement in degrading way on Facebook is an ordinary thing	7.3%	19.1%	10.0%	21.7%	35.3%	6.7%

On the exploratory level, only frequencies of responses are analyzed to establish the picture. Frequencies exhibited a complicated blend of responses. Table II shows that people understand and identify political hate speech shared or generated on Facebook; the outcome is in line with previous studies (Haque, 2014). They understand that sharing or generating such material on Facebook is cybercrime. Respondents were also investigated for the familiarity of political hate speech on social media to explore that which traits of political hate speech are familiar to them? On the statements assessing interest and importance of the issue, the majority of respondents refused to take an interest in spreading political hate on Facebook and claimed that they do not search for such content. Coming across political hate on Facebook is declared as coincidental and accidental by respondents of the study.

Political associations are being abused and used for bad name-calling across the globe. The statements asked to verify this trend in Pakistan, it is also confirmed that Facebook users identify these terms as political jargon in Pakistan instead of slang or bad name-calling.

The perception of people about the importance of deliberating political hate on social media is also investigated. The exposure to political hate speech is explored as an unintentional or coincidental act. Degrading content regarding politics contains but is not limited to text, videos, audios, animations, memes, graffiti, and graphics, etc. This kind of material finds its way on social media quite quickly. People start sharing it on Facebook, Twitter, and even on WhatsApp too. This study demonstrates that most of the respondents showed their disinterest in such material. Most previous studies show that people do not understand online and/or offline political hate speech in Pakistan, and they spread it unknowingly. A few studies confirm that people understand hate speech, and they identify it in their online and offline conversations in Pakistan (Waqas, Salminen, Jung, Almerexhi, & Jansen, 2019).

RQ2: Which patterns of opinion expression do people prefer while expressing an opinion in hostile micro and macro opinion climates on Facebook?

A statement “Imagine someone on your Facebook timeline brings up some content containing Political hate speech (character assassination of individual politician/ hate against a political party) where you know most of the people and you meet them frequently. From the comments and reactions through emoticons like 😊, like 👍, laughter 😂 etc., you can judge that most Facebook users do not support your point of view. In this kind of situation, some people would express their opinions, while others would not. What would be your choice in this situation.”

Table III
Patterns of Opinion Expression Patterns in Micro Climate of Opinion

Statements	% age
I will express my true opinion in a situation like this?	47%
I will post neutral comments without revealing what I really think.	8%
I will try to change the topic of discussion.	10%
I would share a link supporting my opinion.	30%
I will go offline without saying anything.	5%

Another statement “Imagine someone on your Facebook timeline brings up some content containing Political hate speech (character assassination of individual politician/ hate against a political party) where you don’t know most of the people. From the comments and reactions through emoticons like 😊, like 👍, laughter 😂 etc., you can judge that most Facebook users do not support your point of view. In this kind of situation, some people would express their opinions, while others would not. what would be your choice in this situation?”

Table IV
Patterns of Opinion Expression in Macro Climate of Opinion

Statements	% age
I will express my true opinion in a situation like this?	5%
I will post neutral comments without revealing what I really think.	12%
I will try to change the topic of discussion.	23%
I would share a link supporting my opinion.	9%
I will go offline without saying anything.	51%

This question was devised to explore the patterns of opinion expression in two different opinion climates. Impact of overall opinion climate was supported like previous studies (Moy et al., 2001; Neuwirth, 2000; Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Scheufele, 1999). Some scholars found that different people behave differently in a hostile opinion climate. This question explored the way or patterns Facebook users would choose while responding to political hate speech in a hostile opinion climate.

Participants were given the options of expressing a true opinion, posting neutral comments, changing the topic of discussion, sharing a link to express an opinion, and going offline without showing any reaction. Only going offline without saying anything or expressing any opinion is a true depiction of keeping silent in the hostile environment of opinion. Table III demonstrate that Facebook users are

more likely to express their true opinions and share links supporting their true opinions in a micro-climate. Additionally, the results also illustrate that majority of people are more likely to change the topic of discussion or post neutral comments in a macroclimate instead of keeping silent. However, most people tend to go offline without saying anything on the topic in a macro setting. This is a typical depiction of remaining silent in a hostile opinion climate. Table III illustrates that people are more likely to express their true opinions and share links supporting their true opinions in a micro-climate. Additionally, the results also exhibit that majority of people are less likely to change the topic of discussion or post neutral comments in a macroclimate. However, most people tend to go offline without saying anything on the topic in a micro setting. Thus, it is obvious that people prefer certain opinion expression avoidance patterns in a macro-opinion climate, including going offline without saying anything, changing discussion topics, and posting neutral comments. Yet, people still prefer to express their true opinions and share related links in a macroclimate.

Opinion expression varied between micro and macro-climate of opinion on a minor level i.e., link sharing and changing of the topic. Supporting that macro-climate of hostile opinion can lead to higher fear of social isolation (Moy et al., 2001; Priest, 2006). Major findings show that respondents were afraid of opinion expression in macroclimate instead of fearing social isolation in the microclimate of opinion. This is a bit strange, but Pakistan has been facing extremism and terrorism for more than two decades. Perhaps it makes people scared of expressing their true opinion among strangers due to the threat of violent reactions.

H_1 : Facebook users will be more likely to express their opinion on political hate speech if they believe that they fall in perceived majority opinion.

Dependence of willingness to opinion expression on perceived majority opinion climate was determined by simple linear regression for both micro and macro climates of opinion.

Table V
Predicting Willingness to Express Opinion in Macro Climate, from perceived Climate of Opinion

Variable	B	R ²	F	Sig. (p)
Macro Climate of Opinion	1.365	.051	7.132	.011*

The linear regression was evaluated to predict “willingness to express opinion” on a political hate speech based on the macro climate of opinion. The regression equation was significant ($F = 7.132, p = .001$), with an R^2 of .051. Results in Table 5 indicate that participants’ willingness to express opinion on political hate increased significantly in macro climate opinion. Thus, it is affirmed that macro climate of opinion is a significant predictor of one’s willingness to express an opinion about political hate speech on Facebook.

Table VI
Predicting Willingness to Express Opinion in Micro Climate from perceived Climate of Opinion

Variable	B	R ²	F	Sig. (p)
Perceived majority Climate of Opinion	.221	.051	6.641	.010*

The linear regression was evaluated to predict “willingness to express opinion” on a political hate speech in micro climate of opinion. The regression equation was significant ($F = 6.641, p = .010$), with an R^2 of .051. Table 6 illustrates that participants’ willingness to express opinion on political hate is significant in micro climate of opinion. Thus, it is affirmed that micro climate of opinion is a significant predictor of one’s willingness to express an opinion about political hate speech on Facebook. Test results indicated that perceived majority opinion is a significant predictor of one’s willingness to express an opinion about political hate speech on Facebook. It posits that people are conscious about others’ opinion and they judge opinion climate before deliberating their opinion. Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) main dynamic, willingness to express an opinion in the perceived climate of opinion was supported. The findings indicate that most participants considered the climate of opinion on Facebook when they were going to express their opinion.

Moreover, a multiple regression applied to both micro and macro-climate of opinion revealed that only Macro climate was run to find out the significance of climate difference which presented a significant difference of willingness to express an opinion.

Table VII
Willingness to Express Opinion in Micro and Macro Opinion Climate

Opinion Expression	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig.(2-tailed)
Macro Opinion Climate	250	2.43	2.67	3.420	.002
Micro Opinion Climate	250	1.273	1.300		

Table VII explicates that a significant difference existed in the mean values of willingness to express an opinion on a specific issue in an impersonal group ($M=2.43, SD=1.273$) versus a group of friends and acquaintances ($M=2.67, SD=1.300$), $t = 3.420, p = .002$. Thus

willingness to express an opinion was greater in a group of friends (micro group) and acquaintances than in a large, impersonal group (macro group).

Discussion

In a few ways, such as expressing an honest view, opinion expression differed across the micro and macro climates of opinion. However, it did not differ on a big scale in terms of sharing links and changing the debate topic. Given that opinions held within the micro-climate have been linked to a greater fear of social isolation (Glynn & Park, 1997; Moy et al., 2001; Priest, 2006), it was expected that participants would be more willing to express their true opinions outside of their micro-circle, where they would be less afraid of social isolation. However, contrary to prior empirical findings (Priest, 2006), participants were more likely to express their opinion on political hate speech among a small group of friends and acquaintances (micro-climate) rather than a large, impersonal group of strangers on Facebook, as predicted by the hypothesis (macro-climate). According to Priest (2006) findings as well as Moy et al. (2001), found one possible explanation is that participants perceive opinions from their social circle (micro-climate) to be more impactful on their own opinion expression. It suggests that opposing viewpoints from friends and family, rather than the feeling of being in the minority, may contribute to decreased rates of opinion expression. Furthermore, Glynn and Park (1997) discovered that 73% of their participants expected half or more of their social circle to share their viewpoint.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that features and characteristics of the spiral of silence exist on Facebook as they are witnessed for real interaction conditions in previous studies. Keeping silent in real interaction conditions can be replaced with going offline without saying anything about the issue under discussion on Facebook. Posting neutral comments without revealing true opinions is an indicator of deceptive behavior, which is tested as a significant factor. It leads to the conclusion that some certain behaviors need more in-depth studies, which might be explored by surveying less-educated youth, countryside people, and other social settings to understand the phenomenon of creation and dissemination of political hate on Facebook.

Limitations of the Study

The results of this study are limited in their generalizability due to the use of a student sample. The results of this study cannot be extended to a larger group because undergraduate students are generally regarded a "over-studied" demographic. The questionnaires were completed anonymously, and no personal information was recorded. As a result, their responses were prone to social desirability bias. This could have had an impact on measurement validity.

Implications for Future Research

The Spiral of Silence is an often-studied concept and has been applied to many interpersonal, face-to-face communication situations (Moy et al., 2001; Neuwirth, 2000; Priest, 2006). However, there is little or no research applying Noelle-Neumann (1974) concept to computer-mediated communication, particularly to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn. Devoting more attention to the Spiral of Silence and social networking sites may advance the development of measurement instruments specific to social media communication and opinion expression.

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