

Fear of Isolation to One's Willingness to Express Political Opinions in an Online Setting

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Abstract. This research investigates the Spiral of Silence Theory and its application in online settings. It aims to understand the relationship between the fear of isolation and people's willingness to share their political views, particularly among their "friends" and the broader "public" online. The goal is to assess whether this theory remains relevant in the context of computer-mediated communication. In social circles, there is a significant correlation between individuals' fear of isolation and their willingness to express political opinions. It's essential to highlight that the "spiral of silence" phenomenon is still relevant to "friends" in online spaces. When individuals feel supported by their "friends" on platforms like Facebook, they are more likely to share their genuine thoughts on political matters. Additionally, individuals often assess their environment to reduce uncertainties and mitigate the potential consequences of social isolation. This behavior is driven by the fear of facing social repercussions such as being canceled or unfriended, as well as potential conflicts, particularly when expressing personal attitudes or political views. Contrary to the theory, there is no prevailing public opinion online among the general "public" and this does not trigger the spiral effect. Findings from a sufficiently large and diverse audience challenge the traditional Spiral of Silence Theory. Over time, individuals tend to reduce uncertainty, leading to increased verbal communication online, and they will feel more comfortable sharing their views. In the Philippines, social media serves as a platform where freedom of expression is usually realized, providing a convenient avenue for individuals to express their political opinions effortlessly, especially amid recent controversies and dramas being brought to light online.

Keywords: *Spiral of silence, fear of isolation, political opinion, Facebook, social media*

INTRODUCTION

When Mark Zuckerberg and his co-founders established Facebook in 2004, their main objective was to create a platform for meaningful connections and improved communication among students (Clifford, 2018). Today, Facebook has over two billion active users monthly, and the Philippines leads globally in social media usage (Kemp, 2021).

Social media is crucial in shaping public opinion, especially in the political realm. People freely express their opinions on national or state matters, influencing government policy. Social media platforms are now integrated into everyday life and play a significant role in opinion formation and political decisions (Speier, 1950). Today, the younger generation primarily relies on social media as their main source of information (Buenaobra, 2016).

In light of the recent elections in the Philippines and the increased influence of social media on politics and society, it is appropriate to look at how people express their political opinions and how they view other people's political stands to understand whether they will be willing to voice their opinions online. Because people are interested in current affairs and the majority of Filipinos are on social media, citizens' participation may have an impact on the outcome of the research. Filipinos are active users of social media platforms. Consequently, they primarily participate in online activities as viewers. The target respondents of this study are the citizens of one of the first-class cities in the province of Laguna.

The survey questionnaire was administered online, as it was designed to determine the level of fear and willingness of the respondents to express their opinions within their network of friends and the general public in a virtual world online. Through this research, one can find out if the virtual world or the online media environment is a place where people will be willing to resist the norm of the spiral effect, or if the spiral of silence theory still proves to be valid online.

The results of this study aim to shed light on how the spiral of silence theory and its constructs have evolved in the online environment. As a result, the primary goal of this study is to evaluate the key components of the spiral of silence theory—specifically, the degree of

fear of isolation and how it relates to the degree of opinion expression readiness—to see the theory's applicability in computer-mediated settings. By investigating the relationship between the key variables, the researcher aims to gain a deeper insight into the spiral of silence theory and to see whether it is now more difficult to actualize online control of opinion expression in an online setting. The researcher will determine if people turn to a spiral of silence in an online setting because of their fear of isolation.

The findings of this study will contribute to the theory in an online context and will be beneficial to future related research.

Statement of the Problem

In this study, the researcher attempts to extend the spiral of silence online by examining whether this theory takes effect when individuals express their political views on Facebook. This research will assess individuals' fear of isolation in online communication and whether individuals might simulate their offline behavior when expressing opinions in an online world (which might question or reduce the possibility of the spiral of silence effect).

The study aims to explore the relationships between the core constructs of the spiral of silence theory when applied in an online setting which can affect the individual's willingness to express their opinions. This research will assess how individuals differ in their willingness to share political opinions online, both with their Facebook friends and with the general public.

Furthermore, it sought to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the level of fear of isolation of individuals online among their “friends” and the “public”?
2. What is the level of willingness to express political opinions of individuals online among their “friends” and the “public”?
3. What is the relationship between the level of fear of isolation and the level of willingness to express political opinions among their “friends” and the “public” in an online setting?

This is to further understand whether it is now more difficult to actualize online control of political opinion expression in computer-mediated conditions, like on Facebook, a popular

social media platform many individuals use today. Through this research, one can determine whether people are willing to resist the norm of the spiral effect in the online space, and whether the spiral of silence theory still holds true in this context.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is no significant relationship between the level of fear of isolation and the level of willingness to express political opinions among “friends” online.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): There is no significant relationship between the level of fear of isolation and the level of willingness to express political opinions among the “public” online.

Significance

This study will be beneficial to online users, which can help them assess their fear of online isolation to their willingness to express political opinions on Facebook. This study can be a reference to identify viewpoints and illustrate the application of communication theory in an online setting. The online community can help its members improve their outspokenness and participate in such issues, turning social networks into socially inclined avenues for public discussions.

New media, including social networking sites, have a responsibility to facilitate communication and the sharing of information while bringing people together to discuss, exchange ideas, and form online communities. By focusing on this responsibility, developers of computer applications can explore innovative strategies to enhance online communication and create even more engaging user experiences.

This study suggests that the development of communication platforms and the new conditions provided by online communication—along with the vast amount of information being shared and personal information being revealed online—may significantly contribute to research on opinion formation and the spiral of silence phenomenon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of the Internet age will continue to rise and evolve over time, bringing the potential of social networking, as one of the major characteristics of Web 2.0, to resurface in forming, building, and maintaining public opinion (Savigny, 2002:5). According to Hampton et al. (2014), participation in political debate increases one's likelihood of using social media platforms in order to keep up with the latest news. It opened a wider avenue for instantaneous political discussions and opinion exchange. The use of the internet in general and social media users in particular are less likely to rely on traditional media for news and information because of the availability of alternative sources. The new media encourages interpersonal interaction and an unrestricted exchange of ideas. These notions are progressively causing a shift in how the public feels, and individuals seem to feel empowered online.

In the Philippines, social media is now where free speech is being recognized, but this does not mean that this existing freedom online is at its healthiest (Unshackling Expression: The Philippines Report, 2020). According to the findings of a study by Velazques and Rojas (2017), people will express their opinions more frequently on Facebook, in particular, the more confident they feel about using social media to communicate. Witschge (2004) concluded that online political discussions are hardly immune to the obstacles that exist offline. This is particularly true in a social media environment that allows for anonymity, where people will be somewhat encouraged to express their opinions (Dennis, 1996), and where the nature of the platform displays an ambiguous social identity that not only lessens conformity pressure (Nunamaker et al., 1991; Valacich et al., 1992) but also makes users less nervous about doing so in an online communication. Although social media offers the best platform for expressing one's opinions, few people actually do so (e.g., Andreson, Toor, Rainie, and Smith, 2018; Cho et al., 2018). The research by Hayes, Shanahan, and Glynn (2001) indicates that people may feel uncomfortable during conversations about political topics and avoid sharing their opinions, particularly if their views differ from each other. Therefore, people may be anxious to express their opinions in a political discussion, and talking about politics tends to threaten personal relationships (Peacock, 2016). Because political opinion expression is conceptualized in a variety of ways in the literature, it provides a different viewpoint on how an online environment may affect social media users' online political engagement.

Changes in the political environment offer a possibility to think about examining one's willingness to express one's opinions on social media platforms, where new communication dynamics (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2009) may make it less intimidating for people who have been hesitant to express their opinions in a traditional setting than in a computer-mediated chat room (Ho & McLeod, 2008; cited in Chen, 2011:2). As previously discussed, social media presents a less expensive, faster, and more continuous analysis of public opinion expression. The theory must be applied under new circumstances, where people's perceptions of the political climate differ from those in traditional media and where these new paradigms and circumstances may encourage more people to express their opinions (Liu & Fahmy, 2011).

The related studies and literature demonstrate how the internet has now merged with traditional media (Best & Kureger, 2005) and how the new media landscape offers new opportunities for communication while also being distinctive (McDevitt et al., 2003; Witschge, 2007) in retesting and rechecking the spiral of silence in the online world. The emergence of the internet and social networking sites may have hoped to create a variety of public discussion venues where people of color would feel more at ease sharing their opinions and would experience less online isolation, making social networking sites like Facebook an alternative space for engaging in discussions.

In light of these difficulties, regulation of SNS use must be thorough, decisive, and consistent. Even if the nation's election commission is able to establish a clear policy regarding social media campaigning, implementation may present its own difficulties. The use of "fakes" or computer-generated videos that "make it appear that a particular personality is saying or doing something that he or she did not actually say or do" is just one example of how the latest trends put disinformation on a totally new level and require regulation to keep up. Additionally, the spread of fake news has now shifted from social media apps like Facebook and Twitter to messenger apps like WhatsApp, Viber, and Facebook Messenger, where posts or messages are not as publicly shared as the typical apps. Social media regulation is obviously lacking in this area.

A number of issues may limit the usefulness of the Internet, despite some hopes that it will revitalize and revolutionize politics. Because not everyone has access to technology, relying on it could make social divides between the "haves" and "have nots" worse. It is

possible that the ideal "electronic democracy" will not work in practice and that crucial group decisions will not be carried out. The low priority that most people place on political activity may not be changed by internet technology, and the current patterns of political non-participation persist. While it may be possible to develop technological solutions to these issues, there are also significant security concerns that currently restrict the use of technology. For some time, these security concerns may persist to limit people's use of the Internet and social media in particular.

In reality, the socio-technical contexts in which social media sites operate greatly influence the expression of politics. Internet technology is increasingly facilitating the political process. Some analysts believe that making wise use of social media could help resolve issues with the current political system. In light of this, there is optimism that social media may be utilized to keep people informed about issues and provide them the opportunity to participate in decision-making. In response to the new technology, many individuals are creating websites and communicating their political beliefs via email and newsgroups. And with the increased use of social media, it has become a lifeline for digital users to have access to news and political information. Major political parties in many countries have recently increased their use of social media, particularly during election campaigns. For a variety of reasons, mainstream media have not yet fully utilized the technology's potential. Although there may be limitations on how social media can be used for political purposes due to technological and other factors, less effective uses of the Internet may be of greater concern. The public and the media must have a thorough understanding of technology, including its capabilities and limitations, in order to be able to adapt their strategies and fully take advantage of social media.

This is a thorough review of literature about the internet age and the new media, political discussion and opinion expression, online relationships, and the theories and paradigms extended in an online context. It begins with discussing the new media as an available alternative source of news and information, and how social media can encourage online political talk and discussions. Furthermore, the thematic review of the concepts, expression, and formation of opinion describes the historical development of public opinion. The discussion of public opinion is also recognized as a political viewpoint. Focusing on the spiral of silence model, the origins, core constructs, and previous research related to the theory are discussed. In addition, to describe the uncertainty in the social ties of the users, the

uncertainty reduction theory is described as a theoretical paradigm, and the network of friends or online users is defined.

Drawing on such literature, this study attempts to determine the relationship between fear of isolation and willingness to express political opinions in an online setting. By challenging Noelle-Neumann's original spiral of silence, this research provides an opportunity to observe the theory's components. The literature generally indicates that the new dynamics of the Internet and the use of social networking sites challenge some of the central ideas of the spiral of silence when applied online (Chen, 2011; Heney, 2011; Lemin, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Data Gathering

When applying the key variables of the spiral of silence in an online context, the relationship between the fear of isolation and the willingness to express political opinion was examined. The quantitative approach was employed to determine their correlation. According to Babbie (2010) and Muijis (2010), the quantitative research approach places a strong emphasis on precise measurements and the statistical or numerical analysis of data gathered through well-designed questionnaires. Data were reported through statistically significant conclusions. According to Kernan (2014), the correlation measures the strength and/or direction of the relationship between two (2) or more variables and can be either positive or negative.

The survey was conducted among citizens of the City of Calamba, Laguna. A representative sample of residents from one of the first-class cities in Laguna was determined. In choosing the locale, the researcher considered the accessibility of the respondents. The total population of Calamba is 539,671 (based on the 2020 Census of Population). From this figure, the registered voters, as determined by the Commission on Elections (2020), are 310,090. Participants were selected from the registered voters as the researcher required those who participated in the recent election. Voters' engagement is crucial because it empowers people and the communities they serve.

The data collection is based on a survey consisting of 24 required sets of questions measured on a 5-point Likert scale dependent on each identified Facebook user: “friends” and the “public”. To measure the willingness of individuals to express political opinions on Facebook, respondents were asked to what extent they are willing to express their opinions and participate in political discussion among their Facebook “friends” and the “public”. To measure the fear of isolation, respondents were asked to indicate their degree of fear with the six-item questionnaires. Both were developed from Ho, Chen, and Sim's (2013) and Li and Sun's (2017) studies.

Before the actual data-gathering procedure, the questionnaires undergo evaluation by experts. A validation form was provided to at least two (2) experts, they are to assess the degree of relevance of each question item to be measured. Meanwhile, reliability concerns the degree of consistency in the results (Orns, 2022) to pre-test the survey. Pretesting is the administration of the data collection instrument with a small set of respondents. After careful assessment, the survey questionnaires was finalized based on the validity and reliability testing before administering the actual survey.

The survey was distributed online through Facebook Messenger, Instagram, or email to the sample population, and this will serve as the primary instrument. The goal is to collect survey responses from Calamba residents of different ages. The questionnaire is designed to measure and examine the core constructs of the theory and accumulate enough information pertaining to the objectives of the study.

A simple method using descriptive statistics involving mean and standard deviation can be applied in questionnaire surveys. Variables must be measured before they can be related to one another in a questionnaire. Arithmetic means, and standard deviation is used to describe the level of fear of isolation and willingness to express a political opinion. In describing the levels of both, the research study employed the following scale:

Table 1

Measurement Scale of Fear of Isolation

Mean	Scale	Verbal Interpretation
4.50 – 5.00	5	Extreme Fear
3.50 – 4.49	4	High Fear
2.50 – 3.49	3	Moderately Fear
1.50 – 2.49	2	Low Fear
1 – 1.49	1	No Fear at All

Table 2

Measurement Scale of Willingness to Express Political Opinion

Mean	Scale	Verbal Interpretation
4.50 – 5.00	5	Willing
3.50 – 4.49	4	Somewhat Willing
2.50 – 3.49	3	Undecided
1.50 – 2.49	2	Somewhat Unwilling
1 – 1.49	1	Not Willing at All

Correlation analyses was also performed using the Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient. It is a nonparametric measure of the strength and direction of association that exists between two variables measured in at least ordinal scale.

The formula is:

$$r = 1 - \frac{6 \sum d_i^2}{n(n^2 - 1)}$$

Where:

r = Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient

n = number of pairs of data present

d_i = difference in the ranks of the i^{th} element of each score considered

Degree of Relationship

Interpretation on r value	Verbal Interpretation
0	Negligible Correlation
± 0.01 to ± 0.20	Very Weak Correlation
± 0.21 to ± 0.40	Weak Correlation
± 0.41 to ± 0.60	Moderate Correlation
± 0.61 to ± 0.80	Strong Correlation
± 0.81 to ± 1.00	Very Strong or Perfect Correlation

The significance of the correlation was obtained using the p -value with the following interpretation.

- If p -value is greater than the level of significance, the correlation is not significant; and
- If p -value is less than the level of significance, the correlation is significant.

Spearman's correlation uses the ranks of observations of two variables. It is appropriate if the relationship between variables is monotonic which is less restrictive than a linear association and exists in any of the following: (1) as the value of one variable increases, so does the value of the other variable; or (2) as the value of one variable increases, the value of the other variable decreases (Mendenhall, 2009). The forecast with fear of isolation is that it will either encourage or hinder individuals from expressing their viewpoint among their "friends" and "public". The higher the level of fear of isolation, the more willing the individuals are to express their political opinion online with "public". On the other hand, the lower the level of fear of isolation, the lesser willing the individuals are to express their political opinion online with their "friends".

By performing a Spearman's correlation analysis on this survey data, researchers can find out the relationship between two variables statistically, whether or not the one variable has impacted the overall political expression online.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected has been statistically analyzed, presented in tables, and interpreted in relation to the study's specified problems and hypotheses. The results have been presented in the same order as the study's research objectives.

Level of Fear of Isolation of Individuals among “Friends” and the “Public” in an Online Setting

The study aimed to assess the level of fear of isolation experienced by individuals both among their friends and the public. The table below shows the findings derived from the survey responses:

Table 3

Level of Fear of Isolation of Individuals among “Friends” in an Online Setting

	Statement	MEAN	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1.	On Facebook, I worry about being isolated if my “friends” disagree with my political opinion.	2.23	0.99	Low Fear
2.	On Facebook, I tend to silence my honest thoughts when there is a risk of being isolated if my “friends” know my political opinion.	2.22	0.94	Low Fear
3.	On Facebook, I enjoy arguing over political issues with my “friends”.	2.37	1.01	Low Fear
4.	Arguing over political issues gives me a deeper insight of my “friends” insights.	2.3	1.03	Low Fear
5.	On Facebook, I attempt to evade getting into political discussion with my “friends”.	2.32	1.05	Low Fear
6.	On Facebook, I am more afraid of being isolated by my “friends”.	2.24	1.04	Low Fear
Overall Mean		2.28	0.88	Low Fear

Table 3 presents the level of fear of isolation experienced by individuals in an online setting, specifically with their friends on Facebook. It can be noted that mean scores for all six statements range from 2.22 to 2.37, with an overall mean of 2.28, indicating a low level of fear. On average, individuals generally displayed low levels of fear of being isolated when expressing their political opinions on Facebook. Moreover, individuals often experience reduced fear within their social circles when engaging in political discussions online. The

verbal interpretation labels all the mean scores as "Low Fear," indicating that the participants are not fearful about potential isolation, and this data only shows a consistent trend of low fear.

Noelle-Neumann's (1974) premise of fear of isolation is immanent in human nature. However, the fear of isolation among friends and family appears to be relatively low. Many people choose to avoid conversations about politics with family and friends. However, turning family (or friendly) discussions into 'brave spaces' can lead to productive, respectful conversations. Having low fear wants to teach us how to have more productive arguments (Doe, 2019). When expressing opinions online to friends and family, individuals often feel less fearful due to various factors. They present themselves in a way as they wish to be perceived, particularly within their social circles. This self-presentation reduces fear of judgment, as individuals anticipate acceptance from friends and family (Ellison et al., 2007). Thus, they have already overcome their fear of being visible online and have found themselves feeling increasingly less isolated and more socially connected.

In addition, the online environment allows individuals with a fear of isolation to do something about their fear. Previous studies have closely linked the spiral of silence to the fear of isolation. However, Shim and Oh (2019) propose that it could potentially encourage greater participation in online political discourse. As a result of this decreased degree of fear of isolation, individuals might be inclined to constantly consume online political content (news, user posts, comments, etc.) to gauge the public opinion climate and express opinions.

Table 4

Level of Fear of Isolation of Individuals among the “Public” in an Online Setting

Statement	MEAN	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. On Facebook, I worry about being isolated if the "public" disagree with my political opinion.	2.35	1.06	Low Fear
2. On Facebook, I tend to silence my honest thoughts when there is a risk of being isolated if the “public” know my political opinion.	2.25	0.99	Low Fear
3. On Facebook, I enjoy arguing over political issues with the “public”.	2.38	1	Low Fear
4. Arguing over political issues gives me a deeper insight of the “public’s” insights.	2.38	1.03	Low Fear
5. On Facebook, I attempt to evade getting into political discussions with the “public.”	2.36	1.02	Low Fear
6. On Facebook, I am more afraid of being isolated by the “public”.	2.3	1.02	Low Fear
Overall Mean	2.34	0.89	Low Fear

Table 4 displays the data on the level of fear of isolation of individuals among the public in an online setting. The overall mean of 2.34 suggests that people are not significantly afraid of being isolated by others with their political opinions. In addition, they do not experience constant fear of social isolation.

Overall, the findings indicate that individuals are generally less fearful of engaging in political discussions on Facebook and do not have significant concerns about being socially isolated. The majority of the public does not fear their isolation for expressing political opinions online, and disagreement or argument does not faze them.

Social distancing can reduce fear. When communicating online with geographically distant people, especially the public, individuals may perceive reduced social consequences, as the audience may have less direct impact on their daily lives (Suler, 2004). In addition, Suler (2004) suggests that online communication may empower individuals to express behaviors and opinions they might refrain from in face-to-face interactions due to perceived larger and more diverse audiences.

These individuals exhibit a remarkable level of passion for their views, which empowers them to boldly articulate their perspectives in public discourse, even when confronted with opposition (Little, 2014). These individuals show desires to uphold their reputation, whereas greater attention from news and significant events is linked to a more positive or higher likelihood of being able to express or offer an explanation. The majority of individuals don't show fear of social repercussions.

Several pieces of literature predict that people tend to avoid discussing politics and disagreements out of fear of potential negative consequences. However, this fear is not prevalent among individuals in general. In the context of online communication with friends and public audiences, the amount of fear individuals have is relatively low, and they care less when they sense a threat of isolation. People may not be as fearful as when their identity is known to others (Liu & Fahmy, 2011). This may indicate a sense of confidence in their ability to navigate social interactions and express themselves openly in online settings.

Social media platforms like Facebook also offer users the ability to selectively choose with whom they interact and connect (Pariser, 2012) without the fear of being judged. Many people prefer not to interact everyone, including strangers. This can be attributed to having a low fear of isolation. Choosing an online audience can provide a sense of security and reduce feelings of isolation for individuals.

Noelle-Neumann (1974) believes that most people behave according to the rules of the spiral of silence theory, with the assumption that most people live in a constant fear of isolation, both intrinsically and perpetually. While this study measured fear of isolation – treating it as a variable, individuals also expressed low fear among other Facebook users. They felt a slight fear of being alone. Individuals who were likely to avoid the fear of isolation about political issues may, in reality, not conform to group pressure.

The majority of individuals showed hardcoreness and a low fear of isolation among all users of Facebook, be it with family, friends, colleagues, or the general public, which was the opposite of the expectation of the spiral of silence theory. The two groups were found to have similarities when it comes to having a fear of isolation online.

This shows how people, especially young adults, feel more informed, represented, and empowered on social media, reducing feelings of isolation.

Level of Willingness to Express Political Opinions of Individuals among “Friends” and the “Public” in an Online Setting

The data for the second set of questions, which aimed to measure individuals' willingness to express their political opinions with friends and the public in an online setting, are presented below.

Table 5

Level of Willingness to Express Political Opinions of Individuals among “Friends” in an Online Setting

Statement	MEAN	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. On Facebook, I will express my political opinion to my “friends” by either leaving comments, sharing or publishing a post, or clicking the reaction button.	3.09	1.11	Undecided
2. On Facebook, I will discuss with my “friends” about my political opinion by ardently commenting or reacting to their posts.	2.91	1.1	Undecided
3. On Facebook, I will speak of my honest political opinion with my “friends”.	3.1	1.14	Undecided
4. On Facebook, I will say I agree with majority of my “friends” even though I actually disagree with them.	2.68	1.15	Undecided
5. On Facebook, I will give neutral comments to my “friends” without revealing what I really think.	2.92	1.12	Undecided
6. On Facebook, I will say nothing about my political opinion with my “friends”.	2.96	1.13	Undecided
Overall Mean	2.94	0.82	Undecided

The data indicates that the respondents have varying levels of willingness in expressing their political views on Facebook. It further suggests that there is a mix of willingness to engage in online political discussions and openness to expression.

The overall mean which is closest to the midpoint, proposes a clear state of indecision between being somewhat willing and somewhat unwilling to communicate online. Also, being

‘undecided’ implies respondents are hesitant or unsure about how they would engage in political discussions online. This indicates a broader sense of ambivalence among people about political expression on social media platforms and the potential consequences of sharing personal views in a public forum.

According to Moy et al. (2001), individuals are more likely to speak out when they feel that their perspective aligns with that of their family, friends, and acquaintances. This perceived concurrence can serve as a strong predictor of the desire to express oneself.

Filipino culture can contribute to hesitation in expressing political opinions. In Filipino culture, it's important to show respect for authority figures and elders within the family. This respect often leads to a reluctance to express dissenting opinions openly (Enriquez, 1992). Furthermore, individuals may avoid expressing opinions that could lead to conflict or embarrassment due to Filipino values of 'hiya' (shame avoidance) (Pe-Pua; Protacio–Marcelino, 2000). They might choose indirect communication styles or silence to maintain social harmony" (Soriano & Soriano, 2015). People may perceive expressing a dissenting opinion or a viewpoint that contradicts others as disruptive or disrespectful, resulting in feelings of "hiya." Without the “hiya” and without showing respect within close-tie relationships, individuals will have the freedom to express their political views.

In order to fully grasp the dynamics of how individuals communicate and express their opinions in an online setting among a group of family and friends, it is essential understand deeper the cultural factors and societal expectations that influence these interactions. Cultural norms, values, and traditions, as well as societal standards and expectations, play a significant role in shaping how people engage with one another and express their thoughts and opinions in the digital realm.

Individuals are not fully committed to expressing dissenting views or engaging in potentially divisive discussions among their Facebook friends. This could be due to a fear of causing conflict or damaging relationships, or simply a desire to avoid the stress and negativity that can sometimes come with engaging in political discussions online.

In today's world, people tend to rely on their friends' opinions before expressing their own (Centola & Macy, 2007). It is natural for individuals to evaluate the climate of their family and friends' opinions before expressing their own. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the networks of friends play a crucial role in supporting and shaping the way people express their opinions.

Moreover, most people already know their "friends list" (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014) because most of them are already their family members, friends, classmates, and co-workers. As such, this network of friends would likely be the group supporting individuals' opinion expression. Research suggests that perceived agreement with one's friends or family is a stronger predictor of the willingness to express one's opinions than the views of society as a whole (Moy et al., 2001). Despite this hesitancy, it is important for people to feel empowered by their online friends to express their opinions and engage in respectful dialogue with others in order to maintain relationships and foster a healthy and thriving online community.

Duggan and Smith (2019) provided further evidence supporting the idea that political discussions can be highly contentious and lead to conflicts with others. Their research delved into the impact of social media on political discourse and behavior. They also found that online political interactions frequently turned adversarial, with heated debates and arguments arising between individuals with opposing views. These confrontations sometimes led to negative outcomes, including strained relationships and increased hostility. Additionally, the ability to unfriend, unfollow, and block individuals on social media can lead to the selective avoidance of those with differing political views, further discouraging open dialogue (Baysa, 2020).

It is important to consider various factors that can make people hesitant to express their opinions openly online, especially within close relationships. This suggests that when it comes to discussing political views, online platforms may not always provide the most conducive environment for open and constructive dialogue.

Table 6

Level of Willingness to Express Political Opinions of Individuals among the “Public” in an Online Setting

Statement	MEAN	SD	Verbal Interpretation
1. On Facebook, I will express my political opinion to the “public” by either leaving comments, sharing or publishing a post, or clicking the reaction button.	2.9	1.16	Undecided
2. On Facebook, I will discuss with the “public” about my political opinion by ardently commenting or reacting to their post.	2.84	1.16	Undecided
3. On Facebook, I will speak of my honest political opinion with the “public”.	2.93	1.12	Undecided
4. On Facebook, I will say I agree with majority of the “public” even though I actually disagree with them.	2.58	1.06	Undecided
5. On Facebook, I will give neutral comments to the “public” without revealing what I really think.	2.8	1.13	Undecided
6. On Facebook, I will say nothing about my political opinion with the “public”.	2.79	1.11	Undecided
Overall Mean	2.81	0.87	Undecided

Table 6 indicates that respondents are generally undecided about expressing their political opinions among the public on Facebook. The overall mean of 2.81 suggests that, on average, individuals are doubtful if they are willing to share their public opinion online. Across the specific statements, it indicates consistent levels of uncertainty toward political expression among the public audience. Only statement number 4, with a mean score of 2.58, is closest to the statement “somewhat unwilling,” which suggests that individuals are rather not willing to agree with the majority of their “friends” even though they disagree with them.

Based on the data presented, is worth noting that the data does not show a clear pattern of strong willingness or unwillingness to express political opinions in a public online setting. There are uncertainties -about fully committing to expressing dissenting views or engaging in potentially contentious political discussions. The study by Barrett-Maitland and Lynch's (2020) suggests that expressing political opinions on online platforms can make individuals vulnerable to unwelcome attention and potential threats, particularly if their personal information becomes publicly accessible to others. Despite using privacy settings on Facebook, it is crucial to

remember that other users can still access and read someone's name, profile picture, photos, and other personal information.

Similarly, Delany (2021) highlights that social media platforms can serve as fertile grounds for trolls and disinformation campaigns, which may cause people to feel hesitant about participating in discussions where their viewpoints could be distorted or misinterpreted.

Users of social media applications are undoubtedly far less restricted in their ability to speak their minds than users of traditional media. Social media platforms such as Facebook, as an emerging political space, have given users the freedom to talk and be open. However, this study reveals that individuals are all undecided. The findings suggest that individuals do not appear to exhibit greater openness when expressing their political views in the digital realm.

Online discussion forums provide a platform for people to share their thoughts and opinions by posting, commenting, sharing, and reacting. Similarly, Facebook enables users to engage and converse about any topic at their convenience without the fear of being disapproved or ignored. While this may be true, the study's results suggest that people did not show interest in expressing their political views with either their Facebook friends or other users.

If individuals are hesitant to express themselves, this could be due to various factors such as the nature of the platform. Social media can add extra tension to political discussions that are already stressful for many users (Duggan & Smith, 2016), thus making it more challenging to articulate their thoughts and opinions. Another factor could be concerns about potential backlash or conflicts. The fear of being "canceled" has led some to be more mindful of what they say and post online (Shapiro et al., 2021). The Adobo Magazine Online survey found Filipinos were more likely to view cancel culture as "cruel" (45%) and "aggressive" (35%) (Adobo Magazine, 2022). Cancel culture in the Philippines is effective at holding powerful figures accountable online. Calling out and condemning individuals or entities for their offensive or inappropriate behavior or statements can lead to public shaming, which can be a damaging and unproductive way of addressing social and political issues online. The fear of being canceled can discourage open and honest political dialogue.

Some individuals would also prefer to keep their privacy or anonymity among friends and the public (Mutz, 1998). Recent studies have suggested that many individuals may

purposely not react to politically controversial posts or comments to avoid their actions being recorded by social media algorithms or noticed by others (Ellison et al., 2020; Swart, 2021).

Politics might not be a popular topic among survey respondents. Studies have shown that individuals' willingness to speak out is positively related to news attention (Ho et al., 2011; Moy et al., 2001). Exposure to more information and knowledge on controversial issues obtained from mass media such as politics may encourage individuals to engage in conversations (Scheufele et al., 2001). While there are factors, this study did not go beyond the intended inquiry, leaving this issue to other studies and scholars who can further explain it.

Relationship between the Level of Fear of Isolation and Willingness to Express Political Opinions online among “Friends” and the “Public”

The main problem of the study is to explain the association between the fear of isolation and the willingness to express political views online among friends and the general public.

Table 7

Relationship between the Level of Fear of Isolation and the Level of Willingness to Express Political Opinions Online among the “Friends”

		Correlation Coefficient	Interpretation		p -value	Decision	Remarks
FOI and Friends	Friends and WTC	-0.096	Very Weak Negative Correlation		0.044	Reject H1	Significant

Note: “If p-value is less than or equal to the level of significance (0.05) reject Ho, otherwise failed to reject Ho.”

Correlation Coefficient (r): At -0.096 correlation coefficient value, it suggests a very weak negative correlation, but statistically significant

H1: $p < 0.05$

Decision: Reject the null hypothesis 1

Conclusion: There is a significant relationship between FOI and WTEPO among their Facebook friends. Finding a weak correlation that is statistically significant suggests that a particular exposure impacts the outcome variable but that there are other important determinants as well. Therefore, fear of isolation is negatively correlated with willingness to

express political opinions among Facebook friends, but in essence, it is statistically significant. The strength of this relationship is minimal.

It is interesting to note that even in today's world of social media, the spiral of silence phenomenon still seems to exist. More Filipinos are wary of expressing their political views. According to the report, at least 81% of Filipinos were cautious about voicing their political views online (Chi, 2023). Hayes, Shanahan, and Glynn (2001) suggest that discussing political topics can create discomfort and tension among people, especially if their opinions differ from one another. In considering uncertainty, it is necessary to recognize the importance of reducing it and determining the best way to do so. High levels of uncertainty in discussing politics cause increases in information-seeking behavior. Discomfort and tension cause individuals to feel uncertainty. It is more common for people who are familiar with one another to talk about politics in private rather than in public (Conover et al., 2002; Eliasoph, 1998). When family and friends can openly discuss politics in face-to-face interactions, individuals may have many questions that they prefer to ask offline to reduce uncertainty and tension. As uncertainty decreases, people tend to seek less information online and may feel more comfortable when expressing political opinions.

Consequently, individuals may feel anxious about expressing their views during political discussions, which can threaten personal relationships and lead to isolation (Peacock, 2016). Threats of isolation causes the uncertainty. In order to avoid becoming isolated, individuals constantly observe their online environment very closely (Noelle-Neumann, 1977). In the face of high uncertainty that can strain personal relationships, individuals monitor and await their family and friends' online responses before confidently expressing their attitudes, values, and opinions. This idea raises the intimacy level of the conversation. Individuals often consider the perspectives of others until they have a good idea of what others' response will be to avoid isolation and they assess the climate of opinion. When individuals perceive that their opinion is in line with the majority, they may speak out without fear of losing popularity or self-esteem among their friends. In contrast, individuals may elect to remain silent, avoiding situations in which the person will be in a confrontational or embarrassing situation, such as when one's opinion is laughed at or criticized by others (Shoemaker, Breen, & Stamper, 2000) to save face.

Mcleod (2023) supports the idea that individuals derive part of their self-esteem and identity from their circles, including group of friends. Expressing a political opinion that conflicts with the group's beliefs can be perceived as a threat to one's social identity within that group. Therefore, individuals might choose to prioritize maintaining a positive social identity over expressing their true political views. With the Filipino value “hiya” or the sense of shame or embarrassment that arises from social disapproval, individuals may avoid drawing attention to themselves or standing out in a way that could lead to criticism or negative judgment from others.

As social beings, most people are afraid to become isolated from their environment. In the context of social media, fear of isolation was found to be relatively low among “friends.” However, the overall mean of 2.94 with “friends” is much higher than with the “public” suggesting that the willingness is somewhat positive. This research suggests that individuals with low levels of fear of isolation are more likely to express their political opinions online over time from being undecided (Bode, 2012). Such behavior could be due to the fact that these individuals will eventually reduce uncertainty and feel more comfortable sharing their views when they perceive that they will not be socially excluded for holding a particular belief (Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & Van Bavel). This shift in behavior can be beneficial for promoting healthy political discourse and encouraging people to engage in democratic processes among friends (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004). Despite initial uncertainties, it is essential for people to reduce these uncertainties and increase predictability to feel empowered to express their opinions and engage in respectful dialogue with others to foster a healthy and thriving online community (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997).

When individuals are aware that they are not isolated by their “friends” on Facebook, they are likely to become willing to share their genuine thoughts in political discussions. There is a tendency for individuals to assess the opinion climate and reduce uncertainties at the beginning before deciding to express their attitudes and opinions, and their fear of isolation keeps them from expressing opinions perceived to belong to the minority.

Overall, the data implies that various conditions lead us to experience uncertainty when interacting or expressing political opinions with others on Facebook. Individuals seek to reduce uncertainty to enhance their abilities to predict and explain the people with whom they interact,

especially among friends and family. Despite this hesitation they experience during initial interactions, it is important for them to feel empowered to express their opinions and engage in respectful dialogue with others, especially those in close-tied relationships, without the fear of being isolated.

In social circles, there is a significant correlation between individuals' fear of isolation and their willingness to express political opinions. It's important to note that this "spiral of silence" phenomenon still has an impact in online spaces among “friends”. Even a weak correlation might be statistically significant if the sample size is sufficiently large. In essence, finding a weak correlation that is statistically significant implies that the particular fear of isolation impacts the outcome variable, which is the willingness to express political opinions. However, there are also other relevant factors that contribute to this outcome.

Table 8

Relationship between the Level of Fear of Isolation and the Level of Willingness to Express Political Opinions Online among the “Public”

	Correlation Coefficient	Interpretation		p-value	Decision	Remarks
FOI Public and WTC Public	-0.026	Very Negative Correlation	Weak	0.591	Failed to Reject Ho	Not Significant

Note: “If p-value is less than or equal to the level of significance (0.05) reject Ho, otherwise failed to reject Ho.”

Correlation Coefficient (r): At -0.026 correlation coefficient value, it suggests a very weak negative correlation

H2: $\rho > 5$

Decision: Failed to reject the null hypothesis 2

Conclusion: There is no significant relationship between FOI and WTEPO among other Facebook users. The fear of isolation may not have a significant impact on individuals' willingness to express political opinions online. This finding indicate that individuals are willing to voice their thoughts and beliefs regardless of the potential social repercussions they may face. It also emphasizes the importance of online platforms as a means of expressing oneself and engaging in political discourse.

There is a negative and weak correlation between the fear of isolation and the willingness to express political opinions among the general public. Individuals tend to exhibit a relatively low level of fear when it comes to social isolation, and they are still quite hesitant when it comes to expressing their political opinions online. The statistical analysis indicates that this relationship is not significant.

Based on the study conducted among the public, the fear of isolation aspect of the spiral of silence theory is not supported, and the level of fear of isolation does not have a significant impact on the level of willingness to express political opinions online. A growing number of studies argue that the silence phenomenon is decreasing online (Chen, 2018). Individuals will be more vocal about their political expressions. In the context of URT, reduced uncertainty leads to an increase in online verbal communication. People are exercising their freedom of expression and are willing to obtain, share, and disseminate political information on online platforms like Facebook without any intimidation or fear (Bode & Dalrymple, 2019). In the Philippines, social media is where freedom of expression is usually realized (Global Freedom of Expression, 2020). This highlights the growing influence of social media platforms in shaping political discourse. The Philippines is known for its high voter turnout in national elections, often exceeding 75% of registered voters (Borja, Torneo, & Hecita, 2024; Wurfel, 2004; Clarke, 2013; Turner, 2011). Filipinos remain interested in politics (Borja, Torneo, & Hecita, 2024). This can explain the relatively high rates of reciprocity or exchange of information. In interpersonal communication, reciprocity plays a crucial role in maintaining a balanced exchange of information between individuals. Berger and Calabrese posit that reducing mutual uncertainty involves sharing similar information at a consistent rate. As uncertainty decreases, the need for rapid and symmetrical information exchanges also decreases. Furthermore, it is commonly believed that most respondents feel empowered to freely express themselves without fear of repression.

On the internet, people may also feel like they have a larger and more diverse audience especially among the public users compared to face-to-face interactions. This perception can also make them feel more empowered and less fearful of expressing their opinions (Suler, 2004). This sense of empowerment can make individuals more inclined to share their thoughts and engage in discussions, as they feel like they have a platform to voice their ideas to a potentially vast and varied audience.

The presented findings presented challenge Noelle-Neumann's traditional Spiral of Silence Theory, which suggests that individuals tend to keep their opinions if they believe that their views do not align with the majority (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Contrary to this theory, there is no prevailing public opinion online in terms of political discussions among the general public. It is worth considering that the unique functions of online spaces can contribute to this idea. Social media platforms, for instance, provide a convenient avenue for people to express their political opinions effortlessly (Heiss, 2020) and break the barriers where people from diverse backgrounds and networks can communicate freely (Peacock, 2016). These features have contributed to a more open and inclusive political discourse, where people can share their views without fear of social isolation or backlash.

According to the findings of a study by Velazques and Rojas (2017), people will express their opinions more frequently on Facebook in particular, the more confident they feel about using social media to communicate. Through the use of social media, young adults make their voices heard in an effort to raise participation and awareness so that the government can respond more quickly to issues that are present in the nation (Medina, 2019).

The apparent "freedom" that the Internet offers plays an important role in determining someone's willingness to express opinions (Benkler, 2006). Malaspina (2014) contends that because users feel empowered to express their political views online, the new conditions that online conversations provide encourage people to speak up while simultaneously appearing to lessen their fear of social isolation and uncertainty.

In addition, online political discussions are hardly immune to the obstacles that exist offline (Witschge, 2004). This is true in a social media environment that allows for anonymity, where people will be somewhat encouraged to express their opinions (Dennis, 1996), and where the nature of the platform displays an ambiguous social identity that not only lessens conformity pressure (Nunamaker et al., 1991; Valacich et al., 1992) but also makes users less nervous about doing so in an online communication. New communication dynamics (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2009) may make it less intimidating for those who have been reluctant to express their opinions in a traditional setting than in a computer-mediated communication

(Ho& McLeod, 2008; cited in Chen, 2011:2), which presents an opportunity to consider one's willingness to speak out in an online media.

CONCLUSION

After an in-depth analysis of the research data and an extensive review of relevant literature, this study has arrived at several significant conclusions. These conclusions shed light on key aspects of the research topic and provide valuable insights for meeting the research objectives:

Level of Fear of Isolation (FOI) online among “friends” and the “public

Most people in Calamba City do not possess a natural and primarily unconscious fear of being isolated in an online context. The study found that most Facebook users demonstrated a high level of confidence or hardcoreness and were not afraid of isolation when engaging with family, friends, acquaintances, and the public in general.

People may not seem to be as fearful of isolation as previously thought in an online context. This was contrary to what the spiral of silence theory predicts. In conclusion, the study reveals a shift in the dynamics of the spiral of silence in the online sphere. It challenges the traditional assumption that people inherently fear isolation online due to their political views. Instead, it suggests that various factors, such as self-representation, geographic distance, and the anticipation of acceptance, contribute to individuals feeling less fearful when expressing themselves on platforms like Facebook. Additionally, the study highlights the empowering nature of online platforms, as they provide individuals with the opportunity to overcome their fears and engage in constructive and productive discussions. This has transformed online spaces into what some describe as 'brave spaces,' where users feel a sense of safety in expressing their opinions. Overall, the conclusions indicate a significant evolution in the way individuals engage and interact in an online sphere, shedding light on the nuanced factors that influence behavior in this context.

Level of Willingness to Express Political Opinions (WTEPO) Online among “friends” and the “public”

The dynamics of cultural and societal factors, as well as the nature of online platforms, play a crucial role in shaping individuals' behaviors and decisions regarding online political expression. Citizens of Calamba City have faced significant challenges when it comes to expressing their political opinions on social media platforms like Facebook. It leads to a state of indecision as individuals weigh the potential consequences of expressing their opinions.

When discussing political views, online platforms may not always provide the most conducive environment for open and constructive dialogue, and people are still figuring out the best approach to engage in political conversations online. The nature and design of such platforms can either encourage or discourage such expression. In addition, individuals naturally tend to consider the viewpoints of their family and friends to show respect, which is very evident in Filipino culture. Furthermore, some individuals are concerned about facing criticism or conflicts and fear being "canceled," causing them to be more careful about what they say online.

In conclusion, understanding these influences is key to appreciating why and how people choose to express their views publicly. Therefore, the ability of individuals to freely and confidently express their political opinions on social media is significantly influenced by the interplay of cultural, societal, and online factors.

Relationship between Fear of Isolation (FOI) and Willingness to Express Political Opinions (WTEPO) among “friends” and the “public” in an Online Setting

Based on the research and findings, it can be concluded that there is a noteworthy relationship between the Fear of Isolation (FOI) and Willingness to Express Political Opinions (WTEPO) among Facebook "friends", supported by a statistically significant correlation coefficient. This relationship underscores the impact of social connectedness on the expression of genuine political opinions. When individuals are aware that they are not isolated from others on Facebook, they are more likely to share their genuine thoughts on political issues. Despite the advancements in technology and the widespread use of social media, the Spiral of Silence Theory continues to be relevant in today's society, particularly for individuals with strong

online and offline relationships. This is evident among individuals interacting with their family, friends, and acquaintances.

The study suggests that individuals are more likely to share their true political thoughts when they perceive that they are not isolated from others on social media. Furthermore, the significance of the weak correlation with a large sample size emphasizes the importance of gathering diverse and sizeable samples for reliable conclusions.

In conclusion, the "spiral of silence" continues to impact how individuals express their opinions online among their "friends", especially when it comes to political issues. The research suggests that individuals with low levels of fear of isolation are more likely to express their political opinions online over time. This behavior may be due to the fact that these individuals will eventually feel more comfortable sharing their views when they perceive that they will not be socially excluded for holding a particular belief. This change in behavior can be beneficial for promoting healthy political discussion among friends. The unique functions of online platforms, such as the potential for a larger and more diverse audience, anonymity, and reduced conformity pressure, contribute to a more open and inclusive political discourse. This has resulted in increased empowerment and decreased fear of expressing opinions, fostering healthy and thriving online communities for political discussion.

The research on the Spiral of Silence Theory suggests that the dynamics of online political discourse may have altered the traditional notion of the theory. The relevance of the theory persists, particularly for individuals with strong online and offline relationships. However, the research implies that the phenomenon may not be as widespread in online spaces as previously believed. This highlights the changing nature of public opinion and the need to reevaluate theories in the context of evolving communication mediums. The conclusions drawn from this research suggest that the dynamics of online discourse have the potential to reshape the functioning of the Spiral of Silence Theory and warrant further exploration.

Overall, the study underscores the evolving nature of political expression in the digital age and the potential for online spaces to facilitate open and inclusive political discourse. It highlights the need to consider both online and offline factors in understanding the dynamics of political expression and the relevance of the Spiral of Silence.

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