

The factors that affect the expression of opinion of Women on Social Networking Sites

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This paper aims to examine how the Spiral of Silence theory applies with respect to the use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) among women for the opinion expression and the factors that affect their expression of opinion.

Introduction: Spiral of Silence of Women on Online Social Networking

Coffee houses, salons, Banyan tree circles were some discursive spaces that arose to meet unprecedented demands for social gatherings in Kerala. Individuals discussing public affairs with others in public places have not always been a rare phenomenon. Later with the advent of new media, Individuals' opinion expression about public affairs has entered a new phase through social media interaction among fellow citizens such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Instagram etc. In fact, when we check the olden times and a modern time, even though Keralites always tell about women empowerment the expression of opinion of women is still not satisfactory. There are many reasons behind the gender inequality in social media network. This study explores how social media usage by women on the basis of the Theory of Spiral of Silence. And it also explores how women are using social media vehicles such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Instagram etc. for communication about social issues and the women centric issues that are pertinent to them.

Review of Literature

The Spiral of Silence is a mass communication theory introduced by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974) to describe the process of public opinion formation. Noelle-Neumann defines the "spiral of silence" as the process an individual experiences when "he may find that the views he holds are losing ground; the

more this appears to be so, the more uncertain he will become of himself, and the less he will be inclined to express his opinion” .

Indian constitution had given us the freedom of Speech and expression. But there are many situations that the minority's opinions are easily overshadowed by the majority's opinion. The spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) is one of the most prominent theories to describe and express such phenomenon. Noelle-Neumann outlined the spiral of silence theory in 1974 and tested this theory in the interpersonal communication setting. When New media has become an important part of people's daily lives. Many people believe that the Internet breaks social hierarchy and provides a virtual space where every person shares an equal chance to express. Many scholars predicted that spiral of silence may disappear in computer-based-environments, and they tested spiral of silence. The results of these tests contradicted with each other. Yun and Park, found the significant relation between opinion climate and people's willingness to speak out online. Wanta and Dimitrova, found no significant results but only some indications supported spiral of silence effect online. Lee and his coworkers, found opinion climate could influenced people's willingness to express online only when it interacted with some other moderators.

Forty years ago, Noelle-Neumann (1974) formulated spiral of silence theory to explain why some groups remain silent while other groups are more vocal in forums of public disclosure.

“the tendency of the one to speak up and the other to be silent starts off a spiraling process which increasingly establishes one opinion as prevailing one” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Although numerous studies supported Noelle-Neumann's conclusions, there are also many contradictory results and inconsistent findings in spiral of silence studies. In 1997, Glynn, Hayes, and Shanahan did a meta-analysis of survey studies about the opinion climate and people's willingness to speak out. Their study found a significant but very small "relationship between the degree to which a person believes other hold similar opinion and willingness to express those opinions” (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997). Their findings made scholars doubt the suitability and sufficiency of fear of isolation, and search for new factors to explain the

relationship between opinion climate and willingness to speak out.

In 2000, Scheufele and Moy did a conceptual review and empirical outlook about 25 years of spiral of silence studies. They pointed out the main criticism of the spiral of silence as a macro theory was “factors other than fear of isolation that potentially influence people's willingness to speak out” (Scheufele & Moy, 2000).

Many variables have been found out that might affect outspokenness, for example: communication apprehension (Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo, 2007), willingness to self-censor (Hayes, Glynn, Berdayes & Shanahan, 2005), People’s interest in politics (Kim, Han, Shanahan & Berdayes, 2004), cultural differences (Trubinsky, 1991) etc.

Few studies have examined how identities and behaviors of the audience affect people's willingness to speak out in different opinion climates, but the results of some studies suggested that people's willingness to speak out can be influenced by audience behaviors and identities.

Nekmat and Gozenbach's study about websites also predicted that the audience’s identity might influence subjects’ willingness to express. Nekmat and Gozenbach (2007) predicted that individuals would be more likely to express themselves in website-based forums belonging to an ideologically similar activist group as compared with a main-stream news source.

Many scholars have attributed non-significant results online to low social pressure caused by the low social cue environment on the Internet (McDevitt et al., 2003; Zuercher, 2008). McDevitt (2003) found that a short online conversation would make participants express more moderate opinions than when they expressed in face-to-face communication. He posited it was caused by the decreased social cues online, which limited “the capacity for opinion surveillance when discussants are physically isolated from each other” (p.457).

Gender differences

In discussions about politics, it is often said that men are more active participants than women (Verba, et al., 1997). Women tend to be more sensitive about personal relationships, including their ties with friends and family members, and are said to be more concerned about others’ opinion (Cross & Madson, 1997).

According to Noelle-Neumann (1993), In a public situation, men are more disposed to join in talk about controversial topics than are women, younger people than older ones, and those belonging to higher

social strata than those from lower strata. If a faction wins many young people or many well-educated people to its side, it automatically has a better chance of appearing to be the faction destined to gain general acceptance (p. 24). This proposition suggests that an individual's personality, social identification, cultural background, education level, economic status, and gender might amplify or attenuate spiral of silence effects.

Previous research has found evidence for individuals' distinct willingness to speak out about controversial issues depending on these demographic variables (Jeffres et al., 1999; Moy et al., 2001; Scheufele & Moy, 2000). This study focuses on gender effects on the use of SNS, with controls for other factors.

As far as gender is concerned, Eagly (1987) marshaled several studies about gender differences in behaviors within a discussion group and concluded that men tend to give and ask for opinions and suggestions and women tend to act friendly and agree with other group members. This finding indicates the inherent socio-psychological difference between men and women on opinion expression that women are more timid in voicing their opinion because they place more emphasis on maintaining interpersonal relationships and the harmony of their social circle. Further, Eagly (1987) pointed out that behavioral disparities between genders in a small discussion group are positively associated with the gender segment that had relatively more interests and knowledge of the issue.

Bergen (1993) compared individuals sampled from a community in Wichita found that women's willingness to speak out increased with issue-specific contingencies. The influence the spiral of silence proposition that issue involvement and relevance correlates with personal willingness to speak out. Women are more likely to express their opinion when they feel the issue is relevant to them.

As a result, personal identity with social segments or subgroups (based on gender, for example) may produce results that may contradict the theoretical predictions on the choice of communication channel dealing with one's interpersonal relationship. Still, few studies have been done to determine differences between male and female users of social networking sites in terms of their propensity to assess climates of opinion and the tendency to speak out about controversial topics.

Significance of Spiral of silence theory

The spiral of silence theory is one that explores why some remain silent while others are more vocal in forums of public discourse. The theory contends that the silence displayed by certain groups is due to the unpopularity of their opinions in the public sphere. The willingness to speak out on their issues, some of them remain silent due to fear of isolation.

In the present study the researcher checks on factors such as male dominancy, Fear of what others think, Fear against criticism, Lack of Knowledge, Social status that contribute to the spiral of silence. Another factor that could contribute to the spiral of silence is the 'fear of service provider' (after the disclosure of Facebook officials that they have shared the data of the users to Cambridge Analytica, British Political Consultancy Firm).

Methodology

To investigate, the researcher uses Survey Method methodology. The quantitative analysis of data to measure depth of the spiral of silence and factors that affect the spiral of silence will be implemented.

Data collection

The data will be collected randomly from selected women SNS users in Kerala with sample size of 184 respondents between the age group of 18 to 30 years, who are college students.

Objectives

1. To check participation and opinion expression of women in general community SNS.
2. To check the degree of spiral of silence when women discuss the issues significant to them.
3. To check whether there is spiral of silence of men when women's opinion is stronger than men.
4. The determine the major factors that affect 'the spiral of silence' on Facebook and Whatsapp women users.

Hypotheses

1. A group contains men and women, women show less confidence in their abilities than men. Also in SNS the presence of spiral of silence is more evident in the participation and opinion expression of women on general issues on social networking sites.

2. The degree of spiral of silence is less evident while expressing views on women-centric issues on social networking sites.
3. There are many factors that affects spiral of silence. It is expected these factors affect women than men.
4. The degree of spiral of silence is less evident an SNS group that has only women members.

ANALYSIS

Analysis and interpretation of the study was based on the response given by 184 respondents. The proposed data is presented with the help of tables and interpretations.

TABLE 1 – Number of Sites Used

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
One SNS	100	54.3	54.3	54.3
Two SNS	64	34.8	34.8	89.1
Three SNS	14	7.6	7.6	96.7
Four SNS	4	2.2	2.2	98.9
Six SNS	2	1.1	1.1	100.0
Total	184	100.0	100.0	

About 54.3% of the users indicated that they are regularly using one social networking site. 34.8% of the total population taken for the survey uses two sites, 7.6% of the user's posts in three sites, 2.2% of the users uses four sites and 1.1% of the users uses Six sites usually.

TABLE 2 –FAVOURATE SNS

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
WHATSAPP	154	83.7	83.7	83.7
FACEBOOK	14	7.6	7.6	91.3
INSTAGRAM	2	1.1	1.1	92.4
ANY OTHER	14	7.6	7.6	100.0
Total	184	100.0	100.0	

As per the table 2, Mobile Social networking Whats app is in No.1 position, 83.7 % of the women users choose Whats app for their expression of opinion. However, the research also found that 7.6% of the users preferred the Facebook and other social networking sites equally. Only 1.1% like to choose Instagram for expression of opinion.–

TABLE 3 – TOTAL TIME SPEND IN SNS

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
BELOW 15 MIN	16	8.7	8.7	8.7
15- 30 MIN	44	23.9	23.9	32.6
30- 60 MIN	40	21.7	21.7	54.3
1- 2 HRS	56	30.4	30.4	84.8
ABOVE 2 HOURS	28	15.2	15.2	100.0
Total	184	100.0	100.0	

According to the survey, 56 users (30.4%) we consider them as heavy users because they spent 1-2 hours for Social Networking. Second largest number that is 44 users (23.9) spent 15-30 minutes for Social Networking. 21.7% of population used SNS in an average time period of 30-60 minutes. Minimum number of samples that is 28 persons spent above 2 hours for Social Networking.

TABLE 4 – FREQUENCY OF OPINION

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
ALWAYS	7	3.8	3.8
SOMETIMES	145	78.8	62.0
AFFECT SELF	32	17.4	12.0
Total	184	100.0	100.0

Research found that majority that is 145 women (78.8%) raise their opinion sometimes. Mean otherwise they are silent. Only 7 persons (3.8%) express their opinion always. If the discussed issue affects their self then 17.4% of them express opinion.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
INCREASE	40	21.7	21.7
DECREASE	54	29.3	29.3
EQUAL	72	39.1	39.1
DOUBLE	16	8.7	8.7
MORE THAN DOUBLE	2	1.1	1.1
Total	184	100.0	100.0

TABLE 5- OPINION OF EXPRESSION ISSUES RELATED TO WOMEN

When it is checked the opinion of expression of women in women centric issues 39.1% expressed their views equally in all the issues discussed, which may be a public interested issues or a women centric issue. 29.3% users filled the survey form with a view point of there is a decrease of opinion of expression in women centric issues. Only 21.7% says they raise more voice in women centric issues. 8.7% users opinioned they have express more on women centric issues that is almost double when they count.

TABLE 6- FREEDOM OF OPINION IN DIFFERENT GROUPS

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	MALE- FEMALE CLOSE FRIENDS GROUP	82	44.6	44.6
	FEMALE GROUP	102	55.4	100
	Total	184	100	100.0

When checked the freedom of expression in different groups 55.4% of the sample indicated that they are freely expressed their opinion in a group that has only female members. In close friends group that has male and female members a decrease in freedom of expression, 44.6% of the samples expressed their opinion in such groups.

TABLE 7- FACTORS AFFECTS COMMUNICATION

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	FEAR OF OTHERS- WHAT THEY THINK	89	48.4	48.4
	FEAR AGAIST MALE OPINIONS	14	7.6	56.0
	FEAR AGAINST CRITICISM	35	19.0	75.0
	LACK OF KNOWLEDGE	37	20.1	95.1
	SOCIAL STATUS	7	3.8	98.9
	FEAR OF SERVICE PROVIDERS	2	1.1	100.0
	Total	184	100.0	100.0

In the present study the researcher checks on factors such as Fear of others means not the physical fear- psychological fear like ' what they think when I express my opinion', Fear against criticism, Fear against male

opinion, Lack of Knowledge, Social status, Fear of service provider. The research revealed that the main factor that affects opinion of expression of woman is fear of what others think when I express my opinion. 47.3% tells this as the main factor. Lack of knowledge (20.1%) about the subject discussed and fear of criticism (17.9%) are in second and third position respectively. Fourth and fifth positions are carried by fear against male opinion (7.6%) and social status (4.9%). New factor that is fear against service providers is not considered as a factor that blocks only 1% of samples. The young generation is not considering that is not a factor for opinion of expression.

FINDINGS

According to Noelle-Neumann (1993), In a public situation, men are more disposed to join in talk about controversial topics than are women, younger people than older ones, and those belonging to higher social strata than those from lower strata. This study focuses on usage and opinion expression of women in SNS the presence of spiral of silence is more evident in the participation and opinion expression of women on public issues on social networking sites. Research found that when women discuss the general issues majority raise their opinion sometimes. Mean otherwise they are silent. Only 3.8% persons express their opinion always.

The survey also tested opinion of expression of women in women centric issues. The researcher had a pre assumed thinking that in women centric issues the opinion of expression may be very high. But the survey hijacked the thinking pattern of the researcher. Even though surveyed samples are women, 39.1% expressed their views equally in all the issues discussed, which may be a public interested issues or a women centric issue. 29.3% users have a view point of there is a decrease of opinion of expression in women centric issues. Only 21.7% says they raise more voice in women centric issues. So it is very clear there is not such popularity for women centric issues.

There was a fear of freedom of expression in general groups. Women express more freely in a group that has only females.

In the present study the researcher checks on factors such as Fear of others- what they think, Fear against male opinion, Fear against criticism, Lack of Knowledge, Social status, Fear of service provider that contribute to the spiral of silence. The survey reveals the main factor is fear of other's thinking. Most of them do not express their opinion because of if they express opinion what others think about it. They chose

the second and third factor as lack of knowledge and fear of criticism respectively. New fear that is fear of service provider is nominal from 184 samples only two samples had such a fear.

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