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Are people willing to share their political opinions on Facebook? Exploring roles of self-presentational concern in spiral of silence

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites such as Facebook have become a major platform for American political discussion. However, publicly expressing opinions on Facebook can make individuals perceived negatively by their Facebook friends, contributing to the spiral of silence. The purpose of this study is to extend the spiral of silence framework by integrating the perspective of online self-presentation to investigate the psychological processes of Facebook users' political self-disclosure through commenting, sharing and posting behaviors. Survey data from 283 Facebook users confirmed the opinion-congruence based mechanism argued by the classic spiral of silence theory, and found that Facebook users' willingness of online engagement in controversial issues is also related to self-presentational concern and approval-based contingency of self-worth.

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1. Introduction

The expression of opinion on public issues is important for democracy, as it is not only critical for democratic discourse but also essential to facilitate political engagement (Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2012). Facebook has become a major platform for political self-disclosure and public discussion. According to a Pew survey conducted in 2016, 49% of American Facebook users post about politics on Facebook (Pew, 2016a). However, publicly expressing political and social opinion on Facebook can expose individuals to judgment and even criticism from their Facebook friends, contributing to the spiral of silence.

Originally developed to understand the formation of public opinions, the spiral of silence theory suggests that when it comes to public issues, especially morally-implicated issues, individuals tend to stay silent when holding minority views to avoid social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Spiral of silence studies have conceptualized public opinions in terms of political discussion and decision making in a democracy (Noelle-Neuman, 1995). Mass communication research has extensively employed this theory to understand how people use traditional media to evaluate opinion climate (see

Scheufele & Moy, 2000 for a review). As Facebook becomes an increasingly popular platform worldwide for voicing political opinions, it is critical to understand how this platform affects users' willingness to speak out on controversial issues. Although efforts of examining spiral of silence within the context of social networking sites (SNSs) is limited (Pang et al., 2016), current research found that rather than encouraging free self-disclosure of political opinion and facilitating public debate, SNSs like Facebook can silence user discussion about controversial issues (e.g., Hampton et al., 2014; Stoycheff, 2016). However, as Hampton et al. (2014) pointed out, existing research fails to "directly explore why people might remain silent if they felt that their opinions were in the minority" (p. 8). For both theoretical and practical perspectives, it is imperative to study the social-psychological process of political self-disclosure via Facebook.

Facebook has become a major source of news consumption. One Pew study (2016b) shows that 66% of American adults get their news from Facebook. Therefore, individuals may heavily rely on their exposure to political information exchanged via Facebook to form their opinions of the political climate. However, due to Facebook's visibility and persistence affordances, many interactions on Facebook could be exposed to a large audience and stored for a long time (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017). Consequently, Facebook users might be inhibited from voicing unpopular views, in order to avoid undesirable impressions or social isolation in their Facebook

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networks (Metzger, 2009), which largely overlap with their offline networks (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). One possible reason is that political self-disclosure on SNSs is essentially a form of self-presentation (Eliason, 1990), which can impact users' accomplishment of relational and instrumental goals. Therefore, it is necessary to include self-presentational concern in the examination of individuals' political self-disclosure on Facebook and investigate the connection between Facebook technological affordances and users' self-presentational concern.

To fill the gap in current literature, this study aims to expand our understanding of individuals' willingness to express political opinions on Facebook. The purpose is to extend the theoretical framework of the spiral of silence by integrating the perspective of online self-presentation to investigate individuals' expression of political opinions via Facebook. Specifically, we propose that Facebook self-presentational concern (i.e. concerns about one's public image presented on Facebook) should exert its explanatory power in understanding Facebook users' willingness to speak out on controversial issues, a key focus of spiral of silence theory. This study is one of the first attempts to recognize the potential interplay effect of self-presentational concern and perceived opinion climates on political expression on SNSs. The findings of this study will not only contribute to our knowledge of SNSs users' political self-disclosure, but also provide practical implications for raising the awareness of SNSs' role in shaping public opinion.

2. Literature review

2.1. The spiral of silence

The knowledge of public opinion formation is essential to understanding people's attitudes and behaviors (Donsbach & Traugott, 2008). Scholars have utilized theories such as agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), framing theory (Scheufele, 1999), and the third-person effect (Davison, 1983) to examine the formation of public opinion in modern societies. Among the classic theoretical frameworks, the spiral of silence is one theory that explains how public opinion is formed and how it can silence public expression of deviant views (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Built on the assumption that individuals holding opinions of the minority are more likely to be excluded by their social group, this theory posits that individuals express their opinions based on their evaluation of the political climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Specifically, individuals are more willing to speak out and express their true opinions when feeling they are in the majority. Conversely, if they notice an incongruence between their views and the opinion climate, they tend to stay silent to avoid social isolation. When minority opinions are increasingly silenced, the spiraling process begins and leads to the majority opinion being accepted and becoming the prevailing one. Numerous studies have employed the spiral of silence to investigate individuals' willingness to express opinions in public face-to-face settings (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014; see Scheufele & Moy, 2000 for a review).

Traditional spiral of silence research focuses on mass media as a venue for gauging public opinion and assessing opinion climate (e.g., Noelle-Neumann, 1981). The Internet has changed the landscape of political discussion because Internet users are both news consumers and creators (Ramirez & Walther, 2009). Specifically, the Internet offers users additional access to information (e.g., O'Sullivan, 1995) and encourages individuals to express their political opinions freely (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). These benefits can be highlighted for those who cannot publicly voice their opinion via traditional mass media. Thus, the Internet might

encourage expression of different voices and exhibit the potential to contribute to more diverse opinion climates, which research on political self-disclosure in online forums supported (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Kim, Kim, & Oh, 2014; McDevitt, Kioussis, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2003; Yun & Park, 2011).

As SNSs like Facebook become a popular platform for public discussion, recent academic attention has been devoted to understanding how people express their true views on SNSs within the spiral of silence framework. Existing research found that the opinion climate still impacts individuals' self-disclosure over various political issues on SNSs. For example, Hampton et al.'s (2014) study of the Snowden-NSA revelations showed that individuals were more likely to share their opinions when they felt their views were consistent with people on their Facebook and Twitter. Stoycheff's (2016) study on online surveillance also noticed that American individuals were less likely to express their opinion on Facebook when perceiving their views were not consistent with most Americans. Miyata, Yamamoto, and Ogawa's (2015) study of discussion on nuclear power generation also reported a positive relationship between perceived congruence and number of opinions expressed on Twitter. In addition, research also investigated how the spiral of silence applies to certain minority groups. Fox and Warber's (2015) study on queer identity and political expression on Facebook revealed that those who did not disclose their LGBT+ identity on their social networks were being silenced by the perceived heteronormative majority. All these studies indicated that the climate of opinion still exerts its predictive power in influencing individuals' political self-disclosure on SNSs, suggesting that the spiral of silence theory can apply to the understanding of political self-expression on Facebook.

Following previous research (e.g., Fox & Warber, 2015; Gearhart & Zhang, 2014; Pang et al., 2016; Stoycheff, 2016), this study uses Facebook to examine individuals' political expression on SNSs. Based on the spiral of silence's assumption that opinion climates impact individuals' willingness to speak out and the findings from previous research (e.g., Hampton et al., 2014; Miyata, Yamamoto, & Ogawa, 2015; Stoycheff, 2016), we argue that when facing opposition, Facebook users would be less likely to engage in any type of political expression. Given that previous research operationalized political expression on Facebook as commenting, sharing, and posting (e.g., Pang et al., 2016; Stoycheff, 2016), we include commenting on the original post, sharing the post on an individual's personal page, and posting their true opinions when sharing the post on an individual's personal page as different types of political self-disclosure in this study. Therefore, it is proposed:

H1. Incongruence with the majority of opinion on Facebook has a negative relationship with willingness to speak out on Facebook, specifically to express true opinion by (a) commenting on the original post, (b) sharing the post but withholding true opinion, (c) sharing the post with true opinion expressed.

2.2. Self-presentational concern and the spiral of silence

Our communication behavior – both verbal and nonverbal – offers the basis on which others form impressions of us, and we strategically use these communication displays to present ourselves and control how we are perceived by others (Leary, 1995). Online, our text-based updates, photos, videos, articles that we share from others, and even locations that we have checked into function as symbols through which we present ourselves (Schau & Gilly, 2003; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2014). Thus, political expression on SNSs especially Facebook also functions as self-presentation and

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