

Political Campaigns on Social Media and Users' Behavior in the Context of Spiral of Silence

Abstract: *The current research was conducted to study Political Campaigns on social media (Facebook) and the spiral of silence effect on youth. The objectives of the study were to explore how youth use Facebook to determine the climate of opinions related to politics; to examine the implementation of the spiral of silence theory on the issue of politicians' accountability process in the current regime in Pakistan. The purposive sampling technique was used for the collection of samples from the University of Sargodha and comprised of (N= 300) youth participants, including (n=150) males and (n=150) females. A questionnaire was Well-designed for assessing opinion climate and inclination to share their views on controversial political issues. Results of the current study revealed that individuals are more likely to speak out on controversial topics through Facebook than other communication channel. Findings indicate that social media plays an important role in setting up the direction of the public opinion climate beside the group of close friends, which also important role in the assessment of opinion climate on controversial political issues, including politicians' accountability process. In Pakistan, political polarization is on the rise. In this context spiral of silence for deviant opinion is evident from the findings.*

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Key Words: Spiral of Silence effect , Political campaign, Social Media , Youth , Politicians' accountability process.

Introduction

Digital or Social media is computer-aided technology that is used to facilitate the sharing of information and thoughts via virtual channels among communities. Social media is online - based and provides users digitally fast

communication of contents. Contents comprise of personal information, photos, documents and videos ([Dollarhide, 2019](#)). It allows the users to interact and communicate together via internet ([Nasrullah, 2015](#)). The political communication is the pattern of using words or phrases in the motivation of people as they act in the favor of

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political actors (Ball, 2011). In early 2000s with the gradual spread of the internet, the campaigns used this internet to reach out the potential voters. Even it gets hold of the different elections cycles to reach in the popularity of campaign use. In the democratic system, the internet is used as a source for reaching out the voters and provides an easy way to interact (Mitra, 2001). A political campaign is an orderly effort that seeks to influence dynamic procedure within a particular group. Lawmakers use social media as an advanced and viable device to connect with voters through messages of political campaigns (Chadwick & Howard 2010; Biswas et al. 2014; Baker 2012). Mukhongo and Machaira (2016) argue that social media platform allows their users to be active in the way that users do not only consume information, but create or produce content that makes them a driver of change. All Pakistan's political parties used Twitter and Facebook to motivate and mold the opinion of youth towards polling vote for them. The present study involved the political parties recent campaigns over corruption and the accountability process of politicians in Pakistan over corruption, which lead the youth to a spiral of silence effect while get exposure to social media, especially Facebook.

Facebook

In 2004, Mark Zuckerberg and his teammate, including Eduardo Severin, Dustin Muskwit, Chris Hughes and Andrew McCallum, founded Facebook at Howard University. Initially, it was just bounded to the students of Harvard University, but in a few time, it spread to different universities in the Boston area. In today's world, 1 of 7 persons is on Facebook. It is the largest world's social networking site (Zeevi, 2013). Users or client on Facebook can make their pages, interconnect with each other via links to news, posts, videos, photos, and other sources. (Wasswa, 2013). According to Umer Qrueshi (2016), Internet statics shows, 30% of Pakistan's total online population uses Facebook. In which men (71%) and women (29%), use mostly from urban areas of the country. There are over 124 million mobile phone users in the country, and 33% of Pakistani users access Facebook through mobile phones. 70% of the Pakistani population

lay under 24 to 30 years of age, Pakistani Facebook clients use Facebook for 40 minutes every day. Today 64% of Pakistanis are up to 30 years, and 29 % are in the range of 15 to 29 years of age (Najam, retrieved fromTheNews.com, 2018).

Brief History of Facebook Use in Political Campaigns

In 2008, Barack Obama succeeded in his efforts by becoming the 1st presidential candidate who used social media platforms to communicate with voters. As of November 4, 2008, Obama has almost 3,000,000 followers, four times as many followers as John McCain's Facebook and 23 times as many as on Twitter. Obama campaign aired news clips and celebrities' recommendations on YouTube, and the combined views on YouTube viewers took 14 million views of Obama-centric videos in the campaign season 2008. Obama's social media was assisted him to gain the status of celebrity and connect with voter representation groups. During the 2016 U.S. election, the platform of social media has helped candidates like Donald Trump (Republicans), Hillary Clinton (Democrats), and Bernie Sanders to construct a powerful social movement in voters. Social networking sites helped attract candidates 'attention and go viral. Recently during U.S. presidential election 2020, the social media use by candidates in their campaigns was taking an even bigger role than in earlier presidential elections. The Biden campaign alone spent \$45.4 million, and the Trump campaign spent \$48.7 million on ads on Facebook in 2020 (Graham et al., 2020).

In Pakistan, all political parties are actively utilizing SNS since 2008, and it has transformed the political dynamics of Pakistan (Eijaz, 2013). Internet users in Pakistan (19%) are very low as compared to neighbor Asian countries, but the number of users is rising. However, social media significantly use of in a various sectors i.e., health, education, and politics, which allows investigators to examine their use of this media (Ittefaq & Iqbal, 2018). It provides an opportunity to talk about various diverse problems that Pakistani society is facing and to promote participation in national elections. A recent study shows that social media has a strong

political influence on the people of Pakistan ([Karamat & Farooq, 2016](#)). In Pakistan, Facebook is the most used network by young people for information related to politics compared to other social media networks such as Instagram and Twitter. Another study shows that Pakistan ranks second in the world in terms of youth, following Yemen, which has had a major effect on the mobility of Pakistan's policies (Ittefaq & Iqbal, 2018).

It was the first time that the 2013 elections attracted much attention by involving young people in various political activities. All of Pakistan's political parties have made their own dynamic social media sites and Facebook pages to interact with people and keep them updated on electoral events. These sites offer young people the opportunity to be politically active by getting all the information they need ([Musarrat et al., 2018](#)). In the 2018 elections, similar campaign tactics were used. People did different surveys on social media websites and share their opinions about potential leaders. People began to believe in false messages and voting detail about the expected outcome of the general election, which had an impact on the public (Khan, 2018). Social media allows people a platform to discuss political parties and exchange opinions; it means that they have an intense political conscience.

Social Media Political Campaigns and Spiral of Silence

The spiral of silence theory deals with controversial issues, specifically the issues related to moral values. Corruption is a moral issue and its accountability process is a controversial political issue under the current regime in Pakistan. The theory has been primarily praised by political communication experts and has been some major focus in many studies to check individuals' willingness to express themselves on controversial topics. The concept was given by the political scientist Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann in the 1970s. The theory was designed in the post-World War II context in Germany, the theory to state that individuals will prefer to remain silent if they examine that their views are those that in the minority ([Liu & Fahmy, 2011](#)). The first concept in a spiral of silence theory involves the assessment of the climate of opinion. Previous

studies used this concept and assess the climate of opinion through interpersonal discussion and traditional media, but in the modern era social media gives a finer approach to the assessment of opinions ([Chen, 2011](#)). The most common social media site Facebook provides direct access to a user on views' climate-related to politics among one's circle of friends. That network of Facebook friends involves close friends such as those near one's and members of the family that one can frequently meet in everyday life, and at the same time, it offers the facility to observe one's broader circle of friends that may involve old class fellow, students, colleague, and significant others.

The second concept in a spiral of silence theory involves a willingness to express themselves or speaking out. In traditional ways, individuals used to express their political opinion by writing a letter to the editor, taking part in events related to politics, chatting near friends, etc. Now social media has changed ways to communicate with close and broader friends, which raises queries concerning willingness to express ([Chen, 2011](#)). [McLeod & Ho \(2008\)](#) observed students showed much will to avail incognito setting chatting rooms to convey perspectives of them than interpersonal communication with other younger's in the county. Facebook provides a distinct option to speak out via commenting, posting, and sharing of opinions or views to close as well as broader friends. The spiral of silence theory may test on active and non active users of Facebook when they go through any political campaign post. [Tsfati et al.'s \(2014\)](#) survey proposed that exposure to online setting could influence one's perception of the climate of opinion and could distort the perceived opinion formed by the less subjective traditional media. Online expression of opinion can remain lasting, spread fast, and can be easy to copy and search (Boyd, 2010), which may raise the chances that others will find the unpopular views expression and it causes a threat of social acceptance ([Stoycheff, 2016](#)). This difference can impact one's willingness to speak out about unpopular opinion and threat FOI (fear of isolation).

The findings of this study are helpful to political communication scholars, who plan, execute and analyze political campaigns.

Moreover, the findings may highlight the influence of online communication channels over target users (both males and females). It also explains the reference groups' role in persuading one's making the decision in respect of political controversial issues.

Significance of Study

The present study examines the link between the political parties' campaigns over politicians' accountability process either these campaigns supports the accountability process in the favor of the ruling party or against opposition parties and vice versa. This will create a spiral of silence effect among their young supporters as politicians' accountability process in the current regime is a politically controversial issue. Social media, especially Facebook, is fast expanded phenomenon in the world. The statistics on the Internet shows that there are nearly 2.38 billion monthly active client users of Facebook in the world. A vast extent of Facebook influences the political, economic and social views of individuals. Facebook is used to interact and mobilize the followers of Political candidate into a political process. In Pakistan, political parties and their leaders are targeting the youth as 46 % population of Pakistan composes of youth (UNDP, 2018). Spiral of Silence mentions as a situation, where opinions are split between two sides, with one side becoming more vocal, overwhelming the other side into silence (Kanoh, 2000). As research indicates, opinion congruency for different political parties has an indirect coalition with willingness for supporting a political leader on Facebook and in incognito online settings by way of fear of isolation (Kushin et al., 2019). This theory elaborates that fear of isolation is the most influenced element that assists individuals to get an assessment of neighboring climate of views or opinions (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Individuals who perceived themselves in minority on certain subject, they prefer to remain silent while expressing their opinion. The current research will be valuable it will give new horizon for researcher knowing the nature of spiral of silence effect on political campaign and would be helpful to make sound theoretical implications.

Climate of Opinion and Willingness to Speak Out

The spiral of silence theory was presented by Noelle-Neumann in 1974, she describes that individuals desire to assess the climate of opinion as people worry of being isolate, as "the chance of losing the goodwill of one's fellow beings; [the fear] of becoming rejected and alone" (Noelle-Neumann 1993).

Some studies had checked the effect of the spiral of silence on controversial issues related to non-political and political. Such as, [Neuwirth \(2000\)](#) examined the public opinion's variation regarding the authority change in Mexican elections 1982.. [Moy et al. \(2001\)](#) explained the spiral of silence effect on approved policy action, initiated a plan to remove ethnicity, gender considerations and race in recruitment and education. [Neuwirth et al. \(2007\)](#) determined people's opinion expression and fear of being isolated on the issue of U.S. attack on Iraq.

The second important area of spiral of silence theory is one's willingness to show his/her opinion openly. [Noelle-Neumann \(1993\)](#) suggested that person whom advantage position's opinion (i.e. his opinion as same as majority's opinion) is feeling easier to express it than person who belongs to minority She further investigated that the party's voice which is assumed to be win the elections will more strong then party in opposition's voice whom likely to lose.. Electorates, who are in the stronger position or credential have more possibilities to be affected by the candidate who shown strong in campaigns, so in this way, the chances of undecided voters increase to favor the explicit candidate considering that by voting him, they feel to be the part of mainstream. Different researches support [Noelle-Neumann's \(1974\)](#) argument of perceiving the opinion's climate with the fear of isolation are the key factors of speaking out or remaining silent ([Neuwirth et al., 2007](#); Hayes, 2007; Spencer & Croucher, 2008; [Ho & McLeod, 2008](#)).

The studies in the past have shown the association between perceived climate of opinion and people's willingness or unwillingness to speak out ([Noelle-Neumann, 1977](#)). [Shanahan et al. \(2007\)](#) explored analytically constructive

relation among individuals' prediction of remain in majority and their will to express the opinion in the meta-analysis. The result supports that people with clear and solid opinion, despite expressing a minority view, will become a advantaged group. Because people having this clarity seek to impact the people from the opposite side, the passive group might initially lose the advantage position in spite of having the number of followers.

In addition, [Moy et al. \(2001\)](#) suggested that individuals tend to see opinions of others, nearly close to them, which is maybe cited to as the direct relationship, i.e., micro-climate. These close circle members and social trends can impact the individual will to express opinion. Researches indicating individual's predicted climate of opinion in the closed circle relationship and at the same time the majority opinion in general, it concludes that people concerned the majority general opinions and with the feedback from reference group such as peers ([Neuwirth & Frederick, 2004](#); [Neuwirth et al., 2007](#)).

Methodology

Methodology is interpreted as "the science with certain rules and beliefs to manage the choice, composition, method and use of methods according to the pattern of analysis."([Sarantakos, 2004](#)). Survey methods are used now a day in all walks of life. They are used by businesses, buyer

groups, politicians and publicizer in their day-to-day decision-making process." ([Wimmer and chicken, 2010](#)). This analysis was designed to "Political campaign on social media and spiral of silence effect on youth". Survey analysis methodology was acquired to ascertain that respondent to ask political controversial issue (politicians' accountability process in current regime) and check the spiral of silence effect on youth. The spiral of silence s theory measured in two steps in this research study: (1) the perceived importance and the actual use of assessment of climate of opinion via different channels on the issue of politicians' accountability process; (2) the willingness to express the opinion on that particular issue through Facebook (in particular), interpersonal discussion and traditional channels in general.

Findings

The current research study is an attempt to find the spiral of silence model youth on social networking sites. Political communication is the important topic in communication and media studies. Several Pakistani political parties use Facebook as a medium for political propaganda. The current study finds out the effect of spiral of silence on the issue of politicians' accountability process over corruption under the current regime in Pakistan.

Table 1. Frequency Issue Relevance of Politicians' Accountability Process

Category	Overall	Gender		Education	
		Male	Female	BS	MA/MSc
Knowledge of the issue					
Lot about the issue	12	24	2	1	30
well about the issue	46	69	21	48	43
Fair amount	20	3	37	22	17
I know only a little	22	3	39	30	9
No idea at all	0	0	1	0	0
Coverage of the issue on media					
Very Frequently	2	3	1	2	4
Frequently	57	78	36	46	78
Somewhat	16	12	20	16	17
Seldom	25	7	43	38	4
Never	0	0	0	0	0
Talk about the issue with friends					
Very Frequently	6	13	0	8	4

Category	Overall	Gender		Education	
		Male	Female	BS	MA/MSc
Frequently	48	65	30	32	72
Somewhat	28	19	37	38	10
Seldom	17	3	30	19	13
Never	0	0	3	3	0
Concern for the issue					
V high concern	5	7	3	3	9
Hi concern	44	62	27	45	43
Some concern	31	24	37	31	30
Little	20	7	33	21	17
No at all	0	0	0	0	1

*Figure Showing Percentage

Table 1 reveals that overall respondents shows relevance of politicians’ accountability process as “knowledge of the issue” (58%). The extensive analysis in terms of gender shows that male (96%) respondents know the issue of politicians’ accountability process as compared to female (23%) with a significant difference. Similarly, across education levels, it has been observed through empirical findings that respondents of M.A./MSc level of education (73%) know the issue as compared to B.S. level of education (49%) with significant difference.

The analysis reveals that overall respondents shows relevance of politicians’ accountability process as “Coverage of the issue on media” (54%). The exclusive analysis in terms of gender shows that male (81%) respondents see more coverage of the issue of politicians’ accountability process as compared to female (37%) with a significant difference. Similarly across education levels it has been observed through empirical findings that respondents of M.A./MSc level of education (82%) see frequently coverage of issue as compared to B.S. level of education (48%) with significant difference.

The analysis reveals that overall respondents shows relevance of politicians’ accountability process as “Talk about the issue” (58%). The empirical analysis in terms of gender shows that male (78%) respondents talk about the issue of politicians’ accountability process as compared to female (30%) with a significant difference. Similarly across education levels it has been observed through empirical findings that respondents of M.A./MSc level of education (76%) see frequently coverage of issue as compared to BS (40%) with significant difference.

Further, the analysis reveals that overall respondents shows relevance of politicians’ accountability process as "Concern of the issue" (49%). The extensive analysis in terms of gender shows that male (69%) respondents show concern for the issue of politicians’ accountability process as compared to female (30%) with a significant difference. Similarly, across education levels, it has been observed through empirical findings that respondents of M.A./MSc level of education (52%) see frequently coverage of issue as compared to BS (48%) with no significant difference.

Table 2. Willingness to Speak out among Close Friends on Facebook

Majority		N (Count)	N (Percentage)
Speaking	Agreeing	167	55.3
	Sharing with friends	52	17.3
	Agreeing	61	20.3
Not speaking	Gone silent by not sharing with friends	20	6.7
	Minority		
Speaking out	Disagreeing	100	33.3
	Sharing with friends	55	18.3

Majority		N (Count)	N (Percentage)
Not speaking out	Refraining from social media over issue	20	6.7
	Disagreeing	70	23.3
	Not Sharing with friends on social media	55	18.3

Table 2 reveals that when the respondents perceived in majority, (27%) responders not showed willingness to speak to their close friends. They responded “you agree with them only if they ask you for your opinion” (20.3%) and “avoid using Facebook to express my opinion about the issue” (6.7 %). While another hand, the (72.6%) of the respondents speak out on the issue. The respondents group indicated “tell them that you agree with them” (55.3%) and “share links with them that reflect their view of the issue” (17.3%).

While they perceived in the minority among their close circle of friends, (48.3%) of the respondents would not speak out that include those who indicated “avoid using Facebook to express my opinion about the issue” (6.6%), “indicate to them that you disagree with them only if they ask you for your opinion” (23.3%) and “share links with them that reflect their view of the issue” (18.3%). Further (51.7%) of respondents speak out, those who indicated “tell them that you disagree with them” (33.3%) of them who would “share links with them that show an opposite view of the issue” (18.3%).

Table 3. Willingness to Speak Out with Broader Circle of Friends on Facebook

Majority	Items	N (Count)	N (Percentage)
Speaking out	Agreeing	75	25
	Sharing with friends	130	43.3
Not speaking out	Agreeing	75	25
	Gone silent by not sharing with friends	20	6.7
Minority			
Speaking out	Disagreeing	40	13.3
	Sharing with friends	30	10
	Refraining from social media over issue	65	21.7
Not speaking out	Disagreeing	125	41.7
	Not Sharing with friends on social media	40	13.3

Table 3 reveals that when the respondents perceived in majority (32.7%) will speak out to broader friends. These involve who indicated that “you agree with them only if they ask you for your opinion” (25%) and “avoid using Facebook to express my opinion about the issue” (6.7 %). On another hand, (67.3%) of the respondents speak out that include the responders who indicated “tell them that you agree with them” (25%) and “share links with them that reflect their view of the issue” (43.3%).

Among broader friends, (76.7%) of the respondents would not speak out that include respondents “avoid using Facebook to express my opinion about the issue” (21.7%), “indicate to them that you disagree with them only if they ask

you for your opinion” (41.7%) and “share links with them that reflect their view of the issue” (13.3%). (23.3 %) respondents speak out in minority, includes who responded “tell them that you disagree with them” (13.3%) of them who would “share links with them that show an opposite view of the issue” (10%).

Discussion

Social media political campaigning is a new phenomenon in Pakistan. All major political parties use social media as a platform for their motives, which provided a new opportunity to empirically investigate the relationship between political campaigns regarding corruption and politicians' accountability over corruption on

social media and the spiral of silence effect. In this research study, researcher set out to find the extent to which youth in Pakistan using channel of communication i.e. interpersonal, Facebook and traditional channel in the environment of their relationship circle i.e. close and broader friends to show willingness on speaking out. The spiral of silence checked in two steps. At first, assessing the opinion climate about political controversial issue and secondly checks willingness of speaking or sharing on political controversial issues. Results showed Facebook as an important source of knowledge. The close friends are crucial for the assessment of controversial issues in general and particularly in the issue of politicians' accountability process. The respondents showed interest to the politicians' accountability process but they used to give Facebook as more effective source for climate of opinion assessment from close as well as broader friends and they also used Facebook for speaking out on controversial issue, followed by interpersonal discussion.

Furthermore, the study involved the climate of opinions assessment about politicians' accountability process issue. Analysis revealed that respondents know the issue very well and have much concern for the issue. Male respondents showed more concern for the issue as compared to female. The channels usefulness predicts scored high for Facebook and in terms of social relationship reveals that respondents showed close friends are a more important group for assessment of opinion on the issue of politicians' accountability process. The findings supported the study's hypothesis that individuals are more likely to receive opinion climate on the issue of politicians' accountability process from fast friends than the wider circle of friends on different communication channels. The findings in line with other researches as [Frederick and Neuwirth \(2004\)](#) examined that peers' opinions assessment is critical for predicting of individual's point of view towards behavioral restrictions, which showed a influence directly on individual's decision building for a controversial issue.

It was hypothesized individual would more likely to speak via Facebook then others channel in close friend and broader circles of friend on

issue of politicians' accountability process. The findings also get supports from other researches as [Moy et al. \(2001\)](#) suggested that individuals tend see opinions of people nearly close to their, which is maybe cited to as the direct relationship micro-climate. These close circle members and social trends can impact the individual to express. [Moy et al. \(2001\)](#) asserts that it predicts a more consistent variable for expressing oneself in the close group, consisting of friends and family, rather than a wider circle group. Furthermore, [McCroskey & Richmond's \(1987\)](#) also concluded in their research study that individuals show more willing to share their opinion with near friends as compared to a wider circle of friends.

As per hypothesis of the study all users who perceive their selves in the minority on issues related to accountability of the politician are more likely to remain silent on wider circle of friends and they are more likely to share deviant opinion with close circle friends only. Similarly, findings reveal that significant differences were found among close and broader circle of friends to speak out when they perceived their opinion as minority's opinion climate on the issue of politicians' accountability process. The majority of respondents express their opinion to close friends then broader circles of friends while perceiving their opinion in minority. Spiral of silence effect found while speaks to a broader circle of friends on Facebook in minority. Respondents felt easier to express their opinion in the majority opinion's climate for both close friends and broader friend. These findings support the hypothesis. The findings also get supports from other researches as [Nolle-Neumann \(1993\)](#) suggested the person whom view is at the advantage position (i.e. he belong to majority group) is feeling easier for speaking out than person who belongs to minority. [Lenart \(1994\)](#) asserts that the spiral of silence effect predicts more while communicating the people outside the family. The factor that restricts people for expressing their opinion is the fear of isolation as [Salmon and Kline \(1983\)](#) mentioned that the individuals' opinion structure can be ascertained and get strengthened by supporting personal relationships. Social media itself indicate about top trends and climate of public opinion can easily be assessed through trends, hashtags and

viral contents specifically political contents. Recent studies ([Qaisar & Riaz 2020](#); [Qaisar and Riaz 2021](#); [Qaisar, Faiza and Azhar, 2021](#)) indicate the use of social media for setting up political agenda-setting through planned contents creation and sharing. The majority of user tend to stay with dominant opinion or they refrain from sharing their views due to fear of isolation. Another very important dimension is cyber bullying. Cyber bullying has an important role in increasing the spiral of silence. In a research study, [Qaisar, Faiza and Nawaz \(2022\)](#) has concluded political parties deliberately through their media cells tries to suppress deviant opinion by bullying opponents through social media. In Pakistan political polarization is on the rise. It this context spiral of silence for deviant opinion is evident from the findings. In Pakistan political polarization is on the rise. It this context spiral of silence for deviant opinion is evident

from the findings. Trolling opponents for their opinion or statement may also lead to an increasing spiral of silence. Further comprehensive studies with a wider range of social media users can spark more light on the impact of all factors mentioned above in the increasing spiral of silence over controversial political issues in Pakistan. Another very important dimension is the use of social media cells by political parties to enforce their point of view on social media. Media cells of political parties in organized way share things on social media to set trends and make the public perceive that this opinion reflect vast majority of opinion. The same is considered important by news channels and such footages are again reproduced on social media to exert more pressure. Further research studies to provide insights on organized communication over social media and its implication on opinion climate is required.

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