

## Social Media and the Expression of Opinion: Implication on the Spiral of Silence

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**Abstract:** Social media influence and change the way individuals express their views publicly. Social media users have the opportunity to express and share their opinions openly in social media. This study aims to identify social media use among youth in expressing their opinion on the issue and implementation of the Government Transformation Programme (GTP). Spiral of silence theory is used as a basis to see how minorities express their opinions in a changing media environment. The survey method was used to obtain from 200 youths who use social media actively in two zones in Malaysia where 100 respondents were interviewed in the Eastern zone and another 100 in the central zone. The results showed that the interactive nature of social media has become a new platform for youth to express their views even if their views or opinions are contrary to the majority of their colleagues on social media.

**Key words:** Opinion expression, social media, adolescence, spiral of silence, government, government transformation programme

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### INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, freedom of expression is still under government control despite the fact that Malaysia is not restricting freedom of expression as it is written in the Constitution. Lack of freedom of expression in Malaysia is not contradictory to Article 10 of the Federal Constitution which includes freedom of speech assembly and association. However, the existence of specific acts such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, the Sedition Act 1948 led to the seemingly lack of open medium for expression. The existence of social media has opened up the space and opportunity for the public to express opinions, to disseminate information and process issues without censorship of media as gatekeepers that exist in traditional media. This situation gives a new boost in the vicinity of public opinion through social media in our country.

Before the advent of the internet or social media, people in the community used traditional mass media such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio or communicate face to face to express their opinions in public space which is quite limited. In the past, public space refers to an environment such as shops, halls or homes where people can get together, talk and discuss openly about current issues. However with the advent of

the internet, the public space has become increasingly widespread, has covered many and exist in virtual space without having to face one another.

The community's dependence on the internet has an indirect impact on social media usage patterns, the formation of public opinion and behavior in the community to voice their opinions in the country. Mustaffa *et al.* (2013) proved that the community's dependence on the internet, especially, teens is higher (92.5%) than television (46.5%). This shows that the Internet, particularly social media are chosen by the public as major platforms for sharing their opinions publicly. The opinions and views expressed in writing can be shared easily by "share", "comment", "like" or retweet as a sign of consent or objection to the issues discussed.

This situation is contrary to what is assumed by Noelle-Neumann (1974) which states that not everyone had the opportunity to express their opinions openly on certain issues. The power of the traditional media such as newspapers and television only allows the dominant opinion to be discussed openly. Presently, social media has the capability of becoming a medium for the democratization of information, promoting freedom of expression and diversify channels to express opinions and high credibility and reliability than traditional mass media. Is it true that social media is able to influence the youth to voice their opinions openly on social media?

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**Opinion expression:** To this day, there are many studies done on social media applications from the perspective of a spiral of silence theory to the test of behavior in the community to voice their opinions (Lemin 2010; Malaspina, 2014; Lang, 2014). The assumption of fear of being marginalized as voiced by Noelle-Neumann can not be regarded as a major obstacle to the expression of opinion. This is evidenced in a study by Shoemaker *et al.* (2000) which found that the element of “fear of being marginalized” has only a minimal impact in the context of social media. These findings are also supported by Sale who found that social media has changed the spiral of silence phenomenon, especially in matters affecting social change and the opinion sharing which is more honest and transparent. This is due to social media itself which is a medium for the dissemination of information and opinions more openly.

This shows that social media has changed human behavior a lot, particularly in terms of expression of opinion and it is worth to be studied and proved that the assumption by Noelle-Neumann which associates the minority opinion is synonymous and tend to remain silent is not suitable to be applied in the present day. Therefore, this study aims to identify the impact of social media on the expression of opinion among the youth about current issues.

**The spiral of silence:** The spiral of silence theory introduced by Noelle-Neumann (1974) is a theory that explains about public opinion. In particular, it describes a phenomenon where individuals belonging to minority groups will tend to remain silent on the expressed opinion and act to hide their thoughts, preferences and personal views when they are in a group of people who hold the majority opinion.

Noelle-Neumann believes that, it is important for a person to ensure he would not be faced with the threat of isolation, ostracized and marginalized by society than to maintain his personal opinion on certain issues. This means that individuals tend to not express their personal opinions when realizing that they hold opinions that are contrary to the dominant opinion.

This theory holds that the notion of personal opinion depends on the environment that is what is thought, hoped and felt by others, especially from the people who make up the majority opinion. So, the choice to remain silent is said to stem from a fear of the occurrence of social isolation on themselves by surrounding communities and the domination of the discussion of an issue that will also eliminate and silence the minority opinion in a spiral called a spiral of silent.

Noelle-Neumann also said that, the willingness to express opinions is different from the aspects of gender, age, occupation income and residential areas.

Noelle-Neumann also emphasized that the media play a role in providing a dominant public opinion environment to the community. A person is more confident to express his opinions if he has media institutions that support his opinions. The Media’s role is not only to convey information and messages to the public but also serves to establish acceptance and public opinion on various issues. However, media as specified by Noelle-Neumann, focus only on the traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers. In the present context of social media is there still a perception of minority group who are silent instead of voicing their opinions?

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study used a survey method on 200 youths who use social media actively in two zones in Malaysia where 100 respondents were sampled in the Eastern zone and another 100 in the central zone. Purposive sampling was used for this study because the study requires respondents who meet the criteria set: aged 18-40 years, active users of social media and live in the study area of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Selangor, Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan. This study used a survey method on 200 youths who use social media actively in two zones in Malaysia where 100 respondents were sampled in the Eastern zone and another 100 in the central zone. Purposive sampling was used for this study because the study requires respondents who meet the criteria set: aged 18-40 years, active users of social media and live in the study area of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Selangor, Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study discusses frequency of use of social media, the use of social media to voice opinions and compares the use of social media and expression of opinions in terms of locality aspect.

**Frequency of use of social media:** Table 1 shows the pattern of social media use among youth. The most frequently used social media application is WhatsApp (mean = 4.37; SD = 0.83), followed by Facebook (mean = 3.68; SD = 1.13) as the second social media most frequently used. Social media which are less often used by the respondents are Tumblr (mean = 1.43; SD = 1.00) and LinkedIn (mean = 1.38; SD = 0.98).

**Expression of opinion on social media:** Table 2 shows that social media has become a new platform to voice opinions and provide an environment more conducive for discussions, especially on matters that are closely related to national issues and government. The majority of the youth said they “feel free and safe to express opinions on social media about the government without disclosing their true identity” (mean = 3.42; SD = 1.87), “share any information that indicates that they do not agree with the view of colleagues on social media on the issue of

government policy (mean = 3.42; SD = 1.63) and using social media as a place to express an opinion on government policies (mean = 3.36; SD = 1.92).

**Comparison of the use of social media and expression of opinions of the locality:** Table 3 shows that WhatsApp and Facebook are the social media which are often used to express opinion in both the central and Eastern zones. However, there are differences in the average use of social media for every item that reflect events to express opinions on social media.

In the central zone, respondents prefer to use WhatsApp to express an opinion on government policies (mean = 4.51) and share any information that indicates that they do not agree with the view of colleagues (mean = 4.64). In the Eastern zone, WhatsApp is used to join discussion on national issues (mean = 4.62), commenting on national issues involving government policies (mean = 4.60), voicing opinions about the government without disclosing the true identity (mean = 4.56). Noelle-Neumann (1974) has shown that willingness to discuss sensitive issues openly is different according to gender, age, occupation income and residential areas. This means, the difference localities also affect the pattern of expression of opinion among the youth. In this study, researchers looked at the use of social media and expression of opinions among youths in two zones in the central zone and east zone. This finding is in line with what had been proposed by Noelle-Neumann meaning Whatsapp and Facebook are used more and more in the Eastern zone than in the central zone for the purpose of expressing opinion. Meanwhile, Instagram and Twitter are widely used in the central zone than in

Table 1: Frequency of use of social media among youth

Social media	Mean*	SD
WhatsApp	4.37	0.83
Facebook	3.68	1.13
Instagram	3.16	1.56
WeChat	3.08	1.52
Google+	2.97	1.49
Twitter	2.53	1.56
Telegram	2.02	1.50
Blog	1.70	1.16
Tumblr	1.43	1.00
LinkedIn	1.38	0.98

Table 2: Expression of opinion on social media

Items	Mean*	SD
I feel free and safe to express my opinion on social media about the government without exposing the real identity	3.42	1.8
I'll share any information which reflect that I do not agree with the views of friends on social media on the issue of government policy	3.42	1.63
I use social media as a place to express an opinion on government policies	3.36	1.92
I have participated in discussions on national issues involving the government's policy on social media	3.32	1.86
I feel confident to voice my opinions in the media by exposing my real social identity	3.25	1.85
I have commented on discussions of national issues involving government policies on social media	3.18	1.73

\*Scale of 1-5

Table 3: Comparison of the use of social media and expression of opinions in terms of locality

Expressing opinion/Zone	Use of social media (Mean = M)											M*	SD
	Wa	F	I	T	G	Wc	Tg	B	Tr	L			
<b>Participating in discussion on social</b>													
West	4.47	3.40	3.98	3.36	3.43	3.00	2.36	2.06	1.83	1.68	4.20	1.83	
East	4.62	4.17	2.76	2.10	3.17	3.38	1.45	1.62	1.13	1.00	3.52	1.76	
<b>Give comments on discussion on social media</b>													
West	4.43	3.36	3.98	3.36	3.40	3.11	2.43	2.06	1.83	1.68	4.18	1.84	
East	4.60	4.14	2.79	2.18	3.11	3.32	1.39	1.68	1.14	1.00	3.42	1.76	
<b>Social which media is a place for expressing opinion</b>													
West	4.51	3.46	3.95	3.27	3.51	3.02	2.46	2.17	1.83	1.73	4.06	1.79	
East	4.35	3.97	2.61	2.05	3.03	3.19	1.86	1.59	1.20	1.30	3.44	1.73	
<b>I feel free and safe to express my opinion on social media without revealing my true identity</b>													
West	4.47	3.44	3.78	2.84	3.09	2.94	2.50	2.13	1.66	1.56	3.84	1.70	
East	4.56	3.96	2.56	1.74	3.15	3.33	1.56	1.44	1.15	1.07	3.42	1.74	
<b>Share information to express disagreement</b>													
West	4.64	3.45	3.90	2.82	3.18	3.09	2.82	2.23	1.96	1.91	3.64	1.62	
East	4.58	4.15	2.65	2.08	3.46	3.65	1.62	1.62	1.15	1.00	3.44	1.64	
<b>I feel confident to express my opinion on social media by revealing my true identity</b>													
West	4.60	3.64	3.72	3.08	3.24	3.52	2.52	2.00	1.72	1.68	3.48	1.60	
East	4.70	4.17	2.61	1.70	3.17	3.35	1.83	1.78	1.35	1.13	3.34	1.73	

\*Scale of 1-5

the East zone. This may be due to the exposure to the use of social media in the central zone where people are more vulnerable to technological progress more quickly than in the Eastern zone. In addition in the central zone, consisting mostly of the respondents aged 18-25 years and at the same time are heavy users of Twitter and Instagram as compared to Facebook and WhatsApp for all stages of life.

In addition, the study also shows that social media use among youth has influenced the youth to assess the opinion environment on social media with regard to a particular related to government administration. Therefore, social media have opened up opportunities for the youth to express their views even if a person is aware that the youth have a view or opinion that is contrary to the majority of his colleagues on social media. Furthermore special features such as the ability to hide personal identity while giving opinion publicly on social media has also contributed to the democratization of opinion in cyberspace. This is consistent with previous findings by Malaspina (2014) which emphasizes the anonymity as one of the factors that promotes the expression of opinion on social media.

However, this does not mean that youth will not express their personal opinion using their true identity because the findings show that there are still young people who dared to speak even though a small number are less confident and less interested to voice their opinions openly. Thus this has denied early assumption of Noelle-Neumann Theory Silent Circle that minorities often remain silent when they are in the majority group. In fact, those who hold a minority opinion tend to express their opinions on social media than those who hold the majority opinion, particularly with the help of anonymous element, like a button, share, retweet and favorite social media. Indirectly, it is also supported by the findings of previous studies which indicated that indeed there was a relationship between the use of social media and the expression of opinion which generally can be said that the higher the use of social media, the higher a person tends to express opinions in social media (Mohd, 2007; Gearhart and Zhang, 2014).

Expression of opinion is not only affected by the use of social media and even the expression of opinion is also of interest to the environmental assessment of opinion in social media. A person tends to express his opinion on social media, especially when he already knew the pattern of public opinion on social media on an issue at that time. Social media has become a medium to find out what the general public or friends nearby thinks about an issue because often people will express their opinions and share information about anything that they know on social

media. This makes it easier for someone to make environmental assessment before expressing his or her personal opinion. Keene has argued that social media did not kill spiral of silence because of the convenience to access and find out what they think, people have decided to remain silent. However, this study has shown that the two groups either holding the opinion of the majority or the minority have the same opportunities and freedom of speech. Support from friends, media or interested individuals is an additional factor which reinforces the tendency to express opinions. This is supported by Porten-Chee and Eidlers (2015), namely the fear of being marginalized did not prevent a person to express opinions on social media.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, one can say that social media WhatsApp and Facebook are among the social media frequently used by the respondents. This is consistent with the findings of Kemp (2015) which shows WhatsApp and Facebook are the social media application of choice for consumers in Malaysia. The higher the use of social media, the more often users are exposed to current issues, the higher the tendency for a person to express his opinion on social media. In fact, the social media environment which highlight issues that are not discussed openly in the mainstream media have provided the space and opportunities for particular group of people to speak out.

So, it is clear that social media has played an important role in the democratisation of opinion. Society is no longer a passive society of people who only receive information displayed or made available. Today's society is a society that is active and smart in making choices. People now tend to seek additional information and no longer really believe what is shown on traditional media alone. Additionally with the presence of social media individuals can share information that is not available or does not appear on the mainstream media. People have the opportunity to create, criticize or support an issue making social media to be recognized as suitably best medium to convey a piece of information.

Moreover, the threats that limit the expression of opinion can be addressed and reduced. Citizens have an equal right in expressing their opinion whether they belong to the majority or minority group because each of the group has citizens that support their opinion. Additionally in a country practicing administrative democracy, freedom of speech is necessary. However, people should be wise in using social media to provide constructive criticism, not futile criticism.

Perhaps, the control of freedom of speech by the government has to some extent reduced the willingness of the people to speak more openly. Hence, social media used as the medium for open and uncontrolled discussion have provided the opportunity to those who hold a minority opinion to speak freely. Minority opinion is not something that should be silenced or eliminated, but it should be debated and studied, so that, all segments of society have equal rights to expressing their opinions fairly and transparently.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This research is supported by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) by the ministry of Education, Malaysia under the research code: FRGS/1/2014/SS09/UKM/02/1.

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