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Social Media and the Spiral of Silence: The Case of Kuwaiti Female Students' Political Discourse on Twitter

By Ali A. Dashti¹, Hamed H Al-Abdullah² and Hasan A Johar³

Abstract

The theory of the *Spiral of Silence* (Noelle-Neumann, 1984), explained why the view of a minority is not presented when the majority view dominates the public sphere. For years the theory of the spiral of silence was used to describe the isolation of minority opinions when seeking help from traditional media, which play a significant role in increasing the isolation. The fear of isolation makes many people afraid of exchanging their views face-to-face with others. The main fear comes from identifying the people who hold a minority opinion. However, with the proliferation of social networks people have moved online to exchange their views, whether they hold a minority or a majority opinion, as long as their identities are concealed. Although women are the majority population in many Arab societies, their voices are still considered a minority view. In addition to the effects described in the spiral of silence, there are other obstacles to self-expression. Religion, culture, tradition, and education may have a negative effect, preventing women's voice being made public. Social networks have helped to promote women's voices while removing offline obstacles. This paper uses the theory of the spiral of silence in relation to women's online political participation in Twitter, even though they may not be willing to share their opinions offline (face-to-face), to learn whether the theory is still useful as an account of online relationships. The results show that the spiral of silence does not explain the behavior of women, either face-to-face or online.

Key Words: Women, Spiral of Silence, Twitter, Kuwait, Political Participation and Social Media

Introduction

The theory first expounded in the *Spiral of Silence* by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1984) suggests that people remain silent and do not exchange their views face-to-face against the majority view for fear of being isolated. Thus, when the majority view dominates the public sphere, the minority view becomes more difficult to encounter. However, with the proliferation of social networks and anonymous online spaces, millions of people moved to cyberspace to

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became online users, and more and more men and women share their ideas online regardless of whether they are a minority, so long as their identities are concealed (Campbell & Howie, 2014).

In many Arab states women are categorized as a minority and still fight to gain their social, economic and political rights. The constitution does recognize women's rights in many Arab states, but due to other factors, such as tradition, culture and religion, those rights have not been fully recognized in practice. Kuwait is one of the Arab states that recognized women's equality in the constitution and recently gave more political rights to women than other Arab countries. Women became more active in politics and have been appointed to posts that were not open years ago, such being a minister or a member of parliament. External factors including religion, culture, tradition and education were barriers for other women to take part in face-to-face political discourse. These factors may influence women to avoid face-to-face communication for fear of being isolated or negative outcomes from family, friends or society. Social networks have helped women raise their voices while reducing offline obstacles that prevent women from participating in political discussions.

Kuwait is one of the Arab states where women were not given full political rights for years. Only in 2006 did they gain the right to run and vote for the National Assembly. Kuwait is a pioneering nation in providing a speedy Internet for the public, including women, and in the top four in the Arab states for Internet penetration after Bahrain, UAE and Oman (GO-Gulf.com, 2013a). In the Arab region, 88% of the Middle East use social networks (65% men and 35% women) and 68% of the users are between the age of 18 to 34 (GO-Gulf.com, 2013b). Facebook remains the most popular social network program used in the Arab world with 54,552,875 members, of whom 33.4% are female, in the Gulf region. Kuwait comes third after UAE and Qatar (Arab Social Media Report, 2013). In March 2013, the estimated number of active Twitter users in the Arab world reached 3,766,160, and Kuwait comes fourth after Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and UAE for the number of active Twitter users with 225,000. Kuwait leads with the highest number of tweets as of March 2013, sending 6.7% of tweets in the Arab region (Arab Social Media Report, 2013).

New technology provides women with the tools to strengthen their political participation and positively position themselves in society, especially among young women's political activities (Schuster, 2013). This paper tests the theory of the spiral of silence in relation to Twitter and women's political participation. The main hypothesis of this research paper is that women may not be willing to share their views offline (face-to-face), but they do share them online through the use of social networks such as Twitter.

Spiral of Silence

In order to explain how public opinion is formed, Noelle-Neumann (1973; 1977, 1984) proposed the theory of the spiral of silence based on two assumptions: 1) people have the tendency to sense the majority view of public opinion "quasi-statistically" and 2) knowing that being in a minority may lead to behavior of isolation, they adjust their behavior with respect to public opinion. This adjustment behavior is either to share in the majority view openly, or to remain silent and appear to agree with the majority, when in reality they do not (Crandall & Ayres, 2002). The spiral of silence is based on the principle of fear of isolation due to social threats. Through personal relationship and media, individuals assess the climate of opinion, and based on this assessment the individual will decide whether to speak up or stay silent (Malaspina, 2014). Isolation, in Noelle-Neumann's view, is a motivating factor to speak out or not (Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001). The nature of the relationship is another variable that affects the spiral

of silence, where people are unwilling to express their opinions face-to-face with strangers (Crandall & Ayres, 2002). McDevitt et al. (2003, p 456) identify three assumptions of the theory: human action is motivated by the climate of opinion, people can accurately assess the opinion climate, and people believe that the majority will impose negative sanctions on those who hold a minority view. McDevitt et al. (2003) showed in an experimental study that there was a moderation tendency for both those who hold a majority and a minority view. Beside the willingness to express one's opinion and opinion climate, attitude is also an important factor that influences whether individuals speak out or how strongly they feel about an issue (Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, & Carnot, 1993; Krosnick & Petty, 2014; Krosnick & Schuman, 1988). For example, attitude certainty relating to the issue is an important factor in spiral of silence studies which "moderates the relationship between opinion climate and opinion expression" (Matthes, Morrison, & Schemer, 2010, p 776). Attitude certainty and holding attitudes with varying levels of conviction (being correct) help to determine when the opinion climate will affect the expression of opinion. Matthes, Morrison & Schemer (2010, p 777) listed several factors that can increase attitude certainty of individuals, such as direct experience with the attitude object, subjective recall of attitude information, online attitude formation, subjective impressions of successfully resisting persuasive messages, the amount of knowledge, the cognitive elaboration of knowledge, and the structural consistency of attitude-relevant knowledge.

The spiral of silence has been used less to describe online exchanges due to the lack of contextual social cues which are vital for face-to-face communication, allowing the minority to express their views freely without fear of being isolated (Zuercher, 2008). The setting of online public discussion has helped create a positive environment by reducing the influence of social-psychological factors such as anonymity, media usage, fear of isolation and communication apprehension that affect an individual's willingness to express his or her opinion and not fear isolation (Ho & McLeod, 2008). There are other factors that may affect the willingness to participate online such as 1) online channel difference, according to whether the social network is widely used, which leads to the reduction of fear of isolation (Malaspina, 2014), 2) lack of negative responses, 3) using text, so no verbal speech, 4) the sense of self preventing an individual's exposure, and 5) the inability to compare opinions accurately with the majority due to the number of opinions expressed online (Liu & Fahmy, 2009). Anonymity is not essential to defuse the spiral of silence among those who hold a minority view, and a majority view may become more moderate in computer-mediated interaction (McDevitt et al., 2003). Yun and Park (2011) found that in online forums people were equally willing to speak out whether they were in the majority or the minority, but it depends on an individual's perceived climate of opinion online, and the immediate climate of opinion online influences the willingness to post messages. The study by Shen et al. (2009) of China provided empirical evidence regarding online impact on expression of opinion and reached the conclusion that increasing usage of the internet positively increases the posting of information, opinions, and responses online by users, supporting the notion that online participatory behavior is related to the size of the network and internet efficacy. Lee and Kim (2014), testing the theory of the spiral of silence among Korean journalists in relation to Twitter, found that ideology plays a key role in an individual's online participation and journalists are more likely not to present their opinion when they sense that their opinions differ from the majority opinion. The Pew Research Center's study testing the spiral of silence in 1,801 adults found out that social networks (Facebook and Twitter) are not different from offline, and people have the tendency to share their views if they feel that the

audience agrees with them (Hampton et al., 2014). Ho and McLeod's (2008) web-based experimental study provided five elements that can predict the willingness of the individual to speak out: print news use, fear of isolation, communication apprehension, future opinion congruency, and communication setting. However, in computer-mediated discussion the factor of fear of isolation is insignificant.

The media play a crucial role in encouraging the spiral of silence among those who hold a minority view. The media can create a perception that a specific opinion is dominant (Woong Yun & Park, 2011). Accessing the media helps readers make crucial decisions regarding specific issues (Griffin, 2011). The media set the agenda for public discussion and shape impressions about which issue is dominant or on the increase, cover and report the information regarding the climate of the opinion, and report the arguments for one side or the other (Lee, Choi, & Lee, 2004; Moy et al., 2001). Lee's (2012) study of 163 Korean journalists regarding their usage of Twitter found that journalists follow the spiral of silence when they perceive their opinions conflict with the majority of Twitter users. Twitter is not a free space where users can express their minority opinions freely against the majority view. The power of mass communication comes from three aspects 1) ubiquity, meaning the situation of mediating the message ubiquitously in the society, 2) cumulation, where the message is repeated over the time, and 3) consonance, meaning that the media messages are uniform across media channels (Oh, 2011).

Women's Political Participation in Kuwait

The ideal process of political participation means that no opinion should be excluded and any member in a society should be able to express his or her opinion regardless of their position and gender (Matthes et al., 2010). Women in Arab countries are still not given equal political rights with men, and despite the "Arab Spring" they are still not free to participate in political processes (Rousseau, 2013). Before the discovery of oil, women in the Gulf States did indirectly influence major political decisions among tribal leaders and owned their own businesses. This power dynamic led to the creation of a "contextual trajectory" that set the tone to shape and influence future challenges (Krause, 2011).

Among Gulf States Kuwait has a more developed civil society, enjoying a relatively free press, an active parliament and open debate in Diwanias (social gathering places) (Kapiszewski, 2006). Women in Kuwait gained more political choices than those in neighboring Gulf States, and became part of the political environment. However, Al-Mekaimi (2008) argues that women face challenges in relation to Arab tradition, religious decrees and male discrimination which may force many women not to be active in political participation and escape face-to-face engagement. Kuwaiti women have played and continue to play a significant role in their country's development, challenging what has been referred to as 'male-dominated society' (Al-Mekaimi, 2008). Three key factors supported changes in women's political rights: 1) women's rights, such as economic and social rights, did exist but were suspended for years; 2) the Constitution does provide political rights to women equally, but was hampered by a new law restricting the right to vote and run solely to men, and 3) international criticism and pressure on the Kuwaiti government to ease restrictions on women's rights (Al-Mekaimi, 2008, pp 54-55). Advocates of women's rights turned to the constitution to demonstrate that their limited political rights were unconstitutional (Kapiszewski, 2006).

There are many factors affecting women's participation in political life in Kuwait. Among them, cultural, social and political factors include women's lack of awareness of their political rights, lack of methods of political socialization, and the effect of social traditions that

encourage women to depend on men economically, slowing down their ambitions to participate in political decision making (Alqabandi, 2013). As a result, women were deprived of their role in self-determination and defense of their interests and influence in society. With regard to this issue, women's political participation does not only involve standing for election and voting or becoming political leaders, but includes their participation in social organizations of civil society. Alqabandi (2013) noted that the negative explanations of some religious views have also played a great role in constraining women from gaining their political rights, especially in societies where religion is considered to be an important element of legislation. The ruling political elite also affected women's political participation in Kuwait as well as the economic obstacles which reflected the expense of running an election campaign. In that context, the political constraints include women's lack of experience on how to manage election campaigns, lack of experienced women staff, lack of knowledge regarding election regulations, and the negative role played by political and social groups in not supporting women's political rights (Alqabandi, 2013).

Women in Kuwait went through different hard periods starting in the 70s to 2005 in order to gain their political rights (Alshaerawi, 2011). In his book on women and political participation in the Gulf, Mishal Al-Sabah (2013) notes that women achieved their real rights in 2005 but after a long struggle which started in 1971 when male MP provided a proposal giving educated women the right to vote, which faced strong opposition from other MPs. A similar proposal was suggested in 1981, 1985, 1986, 1992, 1996 and 1997. In 1999 the late Emir of Kuwait, Sheik Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, issued a decree to give women full rights as a way of appreciation for their positive role in society during the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Supporters of women's political rights believed strongly that Article 29 of the Constitution gave women equal rights to men⁴.

Following the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, women demanded social and political rights. The first woman (Professor Faiza Al-Kharafi) was appointed president of Kuwait University in 1994, followed by the first female ambassador (Nabila Al-Mulla). In 2005, women won the political right to vote and run for the National Assembly (Kapiszewski, 2006). In 2009, four women were elected and became the first MPs in the National Assembly, and in 2013, the government permitted women to apply for positions as attorneys, leading the way to become judges in the near future.

New technology and social networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook offer women new ways to raise their voices and address their rights in public. Online media technology played an important role enabling women to discuss and present their views freely on different issues while creating new opportunities and challenges for women (Rahbani, 2010). Arab women's usage of the social networks remains low in comparison with women's usage in the world, but Kuwait comes third after Egypt and Saudi Arabia for the number of active Twitter users, and 34% of women use Facebook (Dubai School of Government, 2011). Social networks became the space for Kuwaiti women to express their views regarding political, social, religious, educational and other issues (Dashti, 2009; Dashti & Al-Fadhli, 2011). In 2013, a female teacher was sentenced to 11 years in jail for insulting the Emir, inciting regime change and insulting a religious sect via Twitter (Saidi, 2013). This arrest sheds light on the issue of women's online participation and its effect on other women's participation. The sections that follow explore critical modes of speaking out online in relation to the theory of the spiral of silence and whether it describes the behaviour of Kuwaiti students on Twitter.

⁴ Article 29 states "(1) All people are equal in human dignity and in public rights and duties before the law, without distinction to race, origin, language, or religion. (2) Personal liberty is guaranteed".

Methodology

There are different opinions on the best methodological design to test the theory of the spiral of silence (Kennamer, 2000; Lasorsa, 1991; McDevitt et al., 2003; Scheufle & Moy, 2000). The spiral of silence deals with different social concepts including social comparison, public opinion, interpersonal communication, politics, personal attitude, media usage and personal perception. There seems to be no agreement among researchers studying the spiral of silence on the method to be used testing this theory. Testing the spiral of silence theory may use experimental study (Kennamer, 2000; Lasorsa, 1991; McDevitt et al., 2003; Woong Yun & Park, 2011) or use a survey to study multilevel theories (Pan & McLeod, 1991; Scheufle & Moy, 2000). We use a survey method as a tool to test the hypotheses. A questionnaire with 32 questions was distributed among female students enrolled in media and political science courses at a public and a private university. These two major fields were selected due to the nature of classroom participation where students frequently discuss current events and political issues in class. The sample classes were selected from the two universities' class rosters. Since Kuwait practices class segregation (male and female), male classes were removed from the roster. According to the selected dates, class times were selected for the entire week.⁵ The questionnaire had three sections: the first section was used to gather general information about the respondent, Internet usage, the use of Twitter, and general questions regarding political participation, while the next two sections used Likert scales to determine the respondent's perceptions regarding face-to-face communication and the usage of Twitter for political participation. To test the theory of the spiral of silence in social networks, using Twitter usage among female students, three hypotheses were formulated in accordance with the main null hypothesis:

- H₀:** The spiral of silence is no longer an appropriate way to describe the involvement of Kuwaiti female students using Twitter for political participation.
- H₁:** Female students who have a Twitter account are more likely to participate in political discourse regarding local issues even if their views oppose the majority view.
- H₂:** Female students who are not active in social networks such as Twitter are more likely to behave in accordance with the spiral of silence when participating face-to-face in political discourse about local issues if their views oppose the majority view.
- H₃:** Twitter helps Kuwaiti women to participate in local political issues regardless of whether their views oppose the majority view.

Results and Discussion

Three hundred and twenty three female students (94% were Kuwaitis) took part in the survey and 88% (n=284) were aged 21 to 26. Most of the respondents were single (91%,

⁵The questionnaire was disseminated one week before the 10 days Eid Feast holiday, and it is very common that students do not attend classes before long holidays, which affected the response rate.

(n=293)), and the remainder were married (7.5%, n=24) or divorced (1.6%, n=5). The majority of the students had used the Internet for more than 5 years (85%, n=274), and most of them had a Twitter account (87.3%, n=281). Most of the respondents did not have any problem using their real names (84.7%, n=238), but did not use their personal pictures (69.6%, n=195). Their usage of Twitter was less than one hour per day (37.1%, n=104), from one hour to two hours (28%, n=78), or more than four hours (21%, n=59).

Forty-two percent of the respondents (n=120) did not publish their political views regarding local political issues on Twitter, while 28.4% (n =81) sometimes did, 26% (n=74) rarely did, and 3.5% (n=10) always did. Similarly, this also applied to political issues not related to Kuwait where 45.3% (n=129) did not publish at all, 31.6 (n=90) rarely did, 20.7% (n=59) sometimes did, and 2.5% (n=7) always did.

For the six statements⁶ that were related to face-to-face political participation the Cronbach's Alpha was .860, and for the six statements⁷ related to political participation on Twitter the Cronbach's Alpha was .872. Interestingly, in relation to face-to-face participation with women they know and with women they do not know regarding political issues debated in Kuwait, female students disagreed with the statements. The students participate in political issues that are debated in Kuwait regardless of whether their views oppose the majority view with women they know, and the mean score was 4.0 (n=319, *SD*=1.4)⁸, and with women they do not know the mean score was 3.56 (n=318, *SD*=1.57). However, with similar statements, but with men, the results were quite different, where the mean was 2.78 (n=314, *SD*1.47) for the men they do not know and the mean was 3.37 (n=317, *SD* 1.64) for the men they know.

This shows that gender and knowing people do have an effect on participating in political issues that are debated in Kuwaiti society when holding a minority view. The mean (m=3.06) remains in the middle when it comes to discussing local political issues on Twitter with people they do not know, regardless of whether their view opposes the majority view. See Table 1.

⁶ 1) I discuss political issues that are debated in the Kuwaiti society face-to-face with women I know regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion. 2) I discuss political issues that are debated in the Kuwaiti society face-to-face with women I do not know regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion. 3) I discuss political issues that are debated in the Kuwaiti society face-to-face with men I know regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion. 4) I discuss political issues that are debated in the Kuwaiti society face-to-face with men I do not know regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion. 5) I express my political views in seminars and lectures regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion. 6) I discuss political issues that are debated in the Kuwaiti society regardless of whether my view opposes the local media stand.

⁷ 1) The indirect communication practiced in Twitter encouraged me to express my political views of issues debated in the Kuwaiti society regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion. 2) Hidden identity in Twitter encouraged me to express my political views of issues debated in the Kuwaiti society regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion. 3) I discuss my political views of issues debated in the Kuwaiti society with my followers in Twitter regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion. 4) I discuss my political views of issues debated in the Kuwaiti society with those who I am following in Twitter regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion. 5) I discuss political issues that are debated in the Kuwaiti society in Twitter with people I do not know regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion. 6) I discuss political issues that are debated in the Kuwaiti society in Twitter regardless of whether my view opposes the local media stand.

⁸A five level Likert scale was used in this study: 5 Strongly agree, 4 Agree, 3 Don't know, 2 Disagree and 1 Strongly disagree

Table 1: Discussing Political Issues with Women and Men

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|-----|--------|----------------|
| I discuss political issues that are debated in the Kuwaiti society face-to-face with women I do not know regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion | 318 | 3.3679 | 1.12885 |
| I discuss political issues that are debated in the Kuwaiti society face-to-face with men I do not know regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion | 314 | 2.8153 | 1.09499 |
| I discuss political issues that are debated in the Kuwaiti society on Twitter with people I do not know regardless of whether my view opposes the majority opinion | 274 | 3.0657 | 1.16546 |

Most of the respondents believed that Twitter helps women to express their views on issues that are discussed in the Kuwaiti society freely regardless of whether their view opposes the majority opinion; 65.2% agree while only 16% disagree with a mean of 3.98 (n=279, SD 1.51). This may indicate that fear of being isolated because of face-to-face discussion is declining. The respondents disagreed with the statements related to the fear of isolation for both face-to-face and Twitter, which indicates that female students do share their opinions regardless of whether they are in the minority. See Table 2.

Table 2: Fear of Isolation and Women in Political Discourse

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|-----|--------|----------------|
| Fear of isolation means that I do not discuss political issues that are exchanged in Kuwaiti society face to face with women when my view is contrary to the majority opinion | 314 | 2.6433 | 1.02064 |
| Fear of isolation means that I do not discuss political issues that are exchanged in Kuwaiti society face to face with men when my view is contrary to the majority opinion | 314 | 2.6465 | 1.01705 |
| Fear of isolation means that I do not discuss political issues that are exchanged in Kuwaiti society on Twitter when my view is contrary to the majority opinion | 278 | 2.6799 | 1.02056 |

Conclusion

Even though the results support the null hypothesis that Twitter helps to ease the obstacles for women to take part in political deliberation online by reducing their fear of isolation, women also stated that they share their opinions face-to-face even if their views oppose the majority or the media. These findings do not support H2. However, gender and knowing people do affect women sharing their opinions when their view is opposed to the majority, which may force them into the spiral of silence. With men they do not know, women tend to behave in accordance with the spiral of silence, while with women they do not have a problem sharing their

views when it opposes the view of the majority. This shows that gender and knowing people do have an effect on participating in political issues that are debated in Kuwait. This may be due to the effect of external factors such as religion, culture or tradition on women.

There is no difference between face-to-face and Twitter for women participating in local political discourse. This may be due to women's attitude certainty. This certain attitude is produced by various factors, such as the local constitution, government's positive action toward women, Western support, the weakening of traditional pressures on women, social networks, educational equality for women studying abroad, women's involvement in local political rallies, and positive family support (Al-Mekaimi, 2008; Al-Sabah, 2013; Alqabandi, 2013). All these factors make women's rights a suitable subject for discussion to be addressed in the society regardless of this being a minority opinion. The results show that Twitter provides women with an extra tool which enables them to share their views regardless of whether their views are considered to be in the minority, and these results support H1 and H3. These findings indicate the need for further research exploring the ways in which social networks affect women's political participation and why they do not behave in accordance with the spiral of silence online.

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