



Can spiral of silence and civility predict click speech on Facebook?



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ABSTRACT

Opinion expressions on Facebook are characterized by “click speech” in which people express their opinions and support (or disagreement) of posts through the “like,” “comment,” and “share” buttons. This study uses a 2 (low vs. high opinion congruency) × 2 (message civility vs. incivility) between-subject factorial experiment to examine the spiral of silence on participants' likelihood to interact with social media. We randomly assigned 502 participants to one of four experimental conditions. Results indicate that the fear of isolation increased the likelihood of commenting on Facebook posts and a civil climate increased the likelihood of liking comments on Facebook posts. Findings suggest that “click-speech” could be considered a form of opinion expression.

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1. Introduction

Evolving characteristics of social media now allows for various forms of opinion expressions. Facebook, for example, allows users to click “like” on posts and comments, as well as share content with others. These modes of expression allow content on social media to go viral easier and quicker compared to traditional settings, where expression may be restricted to written or spoken words. Such features contribute to the frequency, intensity, and diversity of opinion expressions.

As social media grow more pervasive with advances in mobile devices, the Internet has emerged as a space where users interact meaningfully with others and form what they perceive to be substantial relationships. Opinion expression is central to social interactions on social media: certain attributes of a post for instance, can encourage or discourage opinion expressions and participation. Although there has been much work on social media for opinion expressions and civic participation, research on how technologically-mediated cues may shape opinion expressions is still lacking (Donsbach, Tsafati, & Salmon, 2014).

2. Online opinion expressions and the spiral of silence

The Spiral of Silence (SOS) theory posits that opinion expressions are dependent on individuals' evaluation of the opinion climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). If individuals perceive that their opinion is congruent with the opinion climate—in other words, they hold a majority-held opinion—they are more likely to express them. If they perceive their opinions to be incongruent with the opinion climate, they are likely to remain silent. SOS originally sought to explain opinion expression in face-to-face settings (Gearhart & Zhang, 2013). As mass media traditionally disseminates information to the public, it is often regarded as the main platforms for individuals to assess opinion climate (Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 1999).

Studies examining SOS in the social media context remain limited, though researchers have found evidence of its relevance. Gearhart and Zhang (2013) found that the willingness to respond to a hypothetical scenario about gay bullying on Facebook was predicted by the willingness to self-censor and congruence with the perceived overall opinion climate – findings aligned with the SOS theory.

However, boundaries between offline and online communication are increasingly blurred. In the contemporary media environment individuals often find themselves crossing back and forth the private and public spheres (Bimber, Flanagan, & Stohl, 2005), suggesting that opinion expressions may emerge from a process of negotiating and communicating in the informational environments rather than the evaluation of a singular informational environment.

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These points highlight that there is much relevance in understanding how opinion expressions and the SOS theory manifests in online settings.

We consider the features of Facebook to examine the diverse forms of opinion expression that have now emerged in online communication. Other than expressing an opinion via a post, Facebook users can also share the posts of others (with or without their personal commentaries), “like” the post (other affective responses such as ‘sad’, ‘angry’ and so on were only introduced by Facebook after the conclusion of this study), and/or comment on the post. These features have been dubbed “click speech” (p. 393), because opinion expressions happen with simple clicks, and do not require users to produce their own content (Sklan, 2013). As Robbins (2013) suggested, click speech has also changed traditional understanding and concepts of opinion expression. Click speech is especially important, because of the ease and ability for opinions to spread and penetrate different social networks quickly.

Click speech provides different measures and indicators of the opinion climate through the number of “likes” or “shares” that a post receives. These information cues indicate the amount of attention or popularity that a post is getting, such that individuals may perceive posts with more attention to be the dominant opinion climate, even though it might not necessarily be so (Schulz & Roessler, 2012).

Online actions are increasing in their impacts. In a lawsuit in Virginia in 2009, former employees of a political candidate claimed that they were fired from their jobs because they had supported their employer’s political opponent by “liking” the opponent’s Facebook page (Felberbaum, 2013). The U.S. federal appeals court concluded in 2013 that clicking “like” constitutes speech and is considered a “substantive statement” (Sklan, 2013, p. 397) and was regarded as action symbolic of expressing full support of the political candidate in real life. The U.S. is not alone in at least attempting to treat click speech on social media as forms of opinion expression. In 2012, the Philippines enacted a legislation that would potentially allow users who “like” defamatory content on Facebook to be charged for online libel. However, following widespread criticisms, the legislation was later suspended (Freedomhouse, n.d.).

However, there are different motivations for “liking” on Facebook (Sklan, 2013). Some users click “like” to get discounts on products, a marketing strategy often used by companies, and others “like” a page just so that they can follow updates. “Likes” do not automatically imply support. Substantive statements can also be generated from the act of sharing on Facebook, in the same way that clicking “like” on a main post does (Robbins, 2013). Therefore, click speech such as liking and sharing posts on Facebook are “symbolic acts,” regarded as forms of speech protected in the U.S. (Robbins, 2013, p. 148).

Regardless of the motivations, intentions to share, like or comment online can be quite different from actual click speech. For instance, Gabbiadini, Mari, and Volpato (2013) showed how the theory of planned behavior accounts for only around three percent of actual commenting behavior in a forum. It is the typical Pareto principle, where only a small proportion contributes to the majority of content generated online, but this may also be understood by the presence of many other forms of opinion expression in the form of click speech.

It is thus important to consider how click speech impact opinion expressions. However, existing studies on SOS in the online context, such as forums and chat rooms, examined traditional modes of opinion expression (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Ng & Detenber, 2005). Even Gearhart and Zhang’s (2013) Facebook study in the SOS context did not leverage on the wider range of opinion expression that social media platforms offer, beyond commenting online or

speaking up offline.

This study aims to address the gap by explicating the range of click speech, as well as traditional modes of expressions using the SOS theory. Central to the theory is the assumption that individuals fear being isolated or ostracized from society, especially if their viewpoints are not congruent with the opinion climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), making them less likely to speak up. The fear of isolation influences the expressions of opinions when there are opinion differences. Many studies carried out in traditional communication settings found that individuals with higher fear of isolation are less likely to express their viewpoint (Ho, Chen, & Sim, 2012; Scheufele, Shanahan, & Lee, 2001).

As for computer-mediated communication, Ho and McLeod (2008) found that the effect from fear of isolation was significantly attenuated in a computer-mediated communication setting, and suggested that reduced social cues in such settings presented a less intimidating environment for opinion expressions. However, social media sites have evolved with several characteristics that shape (or are shaped by) interactions among people. For example, social networks on Facebook are often based on real-world relationships. The fear of not holding a popular opinion may still be a consideration by users in their participation of online discussions (Metzger, 2009). Studies on online ostracism have also presented evidence pointing to the negative effects felt by individuals that are similar to those being ostracized in real life (Kassner, Wesselmann, Law, & Williams, 2012), suggesting that the fear of isolation may also be highly relevant in the online context. We posit the following hypothesis:

H1. Individuals with lower fear of isolation will indicate greater intention to (a) “like” the main Facebook post, (b) “like” the Facebook comments, (c) share the post, (d) comment on the post online, and (e) comment offline in future conversations than those with higher fear of isolation.

The evaluation of opinion climate is another key tenet of the SOS theory. When the opinion climate is congruent to an individual’s existing beliefs or attitudes, there is greater likelihood of expressing one’s opinions. Mass media is often seen as the key disseminator of information, in which people tend to use it as the main platform for assessing opinion climate (Jeffres et al., 1999). However, the reliance on mainstream media to shape or represent opinion climate may no longer hold true with the Internet.

Information on the Internet is generated by a much more diverse group of content producers, which includes journalists (and citizen journalists), organizations, and individuals. This drives “individualized information seeking” (Bonfadelli, 2002, p. 73): users must select their desired content for themselves, for example, by switching between pages until they are satisfied with what they have found. This implies that there is much self-selection and selective exposure, information may be selected subjectively and interpretations may be narrow (Schulz & Roessler, 2012).

In addition, filtering and analytical algorithms on social media increasingly limits exposure to diverse information. In Facebook, information appearing on a user’s newsfeed is influenced by the composition of his social network, tailored by complex algorithms that consider how much the user has interacted with posts of that nature, the number of “likes,” “shares,” and comments the post has received from the user’s friends, whether the user has hidden similar posts before (Backstrom, 2013).

This leads to the increase of highly subjective perceptions of opinion climates (Schulz & Roessler, 2012, p. 351). While the original SOS theory assumes that there is one uniform opinion climate that affects people, individuals today would probably rely on their own perceived opinion climate. This reduces the overall power of the proposition that the opinion climate can predict people’s

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