

## Re-examining the Spiral of Silence Theory in the Chinese Social Context of Weibo

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**Abstract:** The question of whether Noelle-Neumann's (1974, 1991) spiral of silence theory still proves valid in computer-mediated communication settings has increasingly provoked the interest of scholars and experts on media theory. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the applicability of the spiral of silence theory on Weibo, using the issue of banning an online talk show broadcast on [www.iqiyi.com](http://www.iqiyi.com) in which some guests openly endorsed homosexuality as the context of study. Similar to numerous extant research studies, our study tested two traditional predictors of the spiral of silence theory, fear of isolation and opinion climate perception. As shown by the findings, perceived opinion congruency was positively correlated with individuals' willingness of expression, whereas fear of isolation was negatively associated, which was in consonance with the theory's hypothesis. However, one point worth noting is that under circumstances of communication over the Internet, fear of isolation was found to exist as a mediator affecting the relation between anonymity and public outspokenness. In other words, individuals, as long as they could conceal their personal information, would display intense desire to verbalize their stance on Weibo even though they perceived themselves as in the minority. Since disparity of social status could also be detected on Weibo, our study includes a new predictor, power distance, in the theoretical framework, and reveals that there is a negative correlation between power distance and individuals' willingness of expression. Overall, our findings demonstrate that the spiral of silence theory is not completely tenable in online environments, because the unique characteristics of the Internet may eliminate the effects of the spiral of silence exerted on individuals, making it harder to predict how public opinion will change.

**Keywords:** Spiral of silence theory, willingness of expression, fear of isolation, perceived opinion congruency, anonymity, power distance, computer-mediated communication

### 1. Introduction

Proposed by Noelle-Neumann (1974), the spiral of silence theory presumes that individuals are reluctant to verbalize their opinions publicly, owing to a fear of isolation. Precisely, for morally

loaded issues, when an individual's viewpoint is deviant from the idea to which the majority is committed, this individual will choose to remain silent, averting isolation and exclusion from other social beings. As a consequence, with the silence of minor opposing voices, the mass opinion will garner more and more public support, eventually developing into a social norm. However, such theory seems to be dispelled in computer-mediated communication, for the proliferation of new media has radically changed the traditional media environment, revolutionizing the way that individuals access information on current affairs.

Dissimilar from any previous technologies, new media features interactive user response and active participation, which allows individuals throughout the world to confer about miscellaneous topics. The quantitative surge of online information gradually diversifies public opinion, for any new user-generated content can disclose unprecedented viewpoints presented by the mass media. In this case, the spiraling process will become harder to start, for individuals fail to clearly differentiate the majority's view and the minority's stance. As hypothesized by the spiral of silence theory, individuals are scared of social exclusion and thus dare to state their opinions only when they perceive themselves in line with the majority. In point of fact, a sizable proportion of netizens do not exude any fear of isolation when their opinions are poles apart from the commonly held belief. And it is not uncommon to see that some netizens openly confront people in higher positions such as authorities and celebrities. By filtering their opinions through the general public via the Internet, these netizens sway public opinion and affect the direction of the spiral.

According to Zuercher (2009), "while there have been a number of studies that have dealt with the issue of opinion expression within computer-mediated communication, few have actually examined such behavior through a perspective that utilized Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory" (p. 3). Rooted in the bandwagon effect observed in the 1965 and 1972 US Presidential elections, the spiral of silence theory posits that "the perceived climate of public opinion has a force so powerful that it can coerce minority opinion holders to effectively silence themselves out of a fear of isolation" (Zuercher, 2009, p. 3). Yet, most extant studies have only empirically tested whether the spiral of silence is valid within the sphere of face-to-face communication. As a result, some scholars such as Zuercher started to cast doubt upon the validity of the theory in computer-mediated communication. They held that "the fear of social isolation seems diminished when conversations take place through computer-mediated discourse due to the unique contextual features afforded by such communication" (Zuercher, 2009, p. 3).

Hence, there are two main purposes of our study. Firstly, to examine two core constructs of the spiral of silence theory, fear of isolation and perceived opinion congruency, using the contentious issue of homosexuality in China as the setting, to see whether the theory is still applicable in computer-mediated conditions. Secondly, we attempt to explore new illustrative predictors of the theory by scrutinizing the prospective impact of anonymity and power distance on individuals' willingness to express opinion. By investigating their relationship, we hope to gain a deeper insight of the spiral of silence theory, and to see whether it is now more difficult to actualize online control of public opinion in cyberspace. We also cherish the hope that our findings will make a contribution to the theory and be conducive to future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Spiral of Silence Theory**

As postulated by the spiral of silence theory, individuals will utilize their “quasi-statistical sense” to distinguish popular and unpopular stances among the general public (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). They tend to express themselves only if they perceive that their opinions are in the majority. On the contrary, given that an individual’s viewpoint is perceived as losing favor, that individual would become less likely to articulate their point of view in consideration of the potential outcome of being ostracized. It is conceivable that when adherents of minority opinions begin to conceal their voices, their stances also get harder to be heard by the public. These minority voices will subsequently be marginalized, finally fading from public opinion. And in the meantime, this downward spiraling of unwelcome perspectives enables opinions in the majority to gain support continuously and thus become dominant in the opinion climate.

The spiral of silence theory was suggested by Noelle-Neumann after she observed a bewildering phenomenon during the 1972 US Presidential election where a bandwagon effect induced a number of voters to switch their position to the perceived winner’s side. The theory provides a useful framework to illustrate why individuals sometimes become uncomfortable in verbalizing their points of view, while at other times they feel encouraged to express their opinions. Our study will attempt to extend this theory to computer-mediated communication by examining whether the spiral of silence takes effect when individuals participate in a discussion about homosexuality on Weibo.

### **2.2. Individuals’ Willingness to Express Opinion**

Weibo, a type of computer mediated communication, provides a new and different context where the spiral of silence theory is examined without having to worry about the respondents’ ability to enunciate their viewpoints. Online discussion forums are spots where expressing opinions can be actualized by simply posting messages. Akin to that, Weibo is a social network platform which allows users to launch at their convenience and converse about anything they like without any concern of whether their opinions will be disapproved of or even noticed. Yun and Park (2011) stated that “although this rather simplistic view of the psychological dynamics on online discussion forums has not yet been systematically examined, the users of online forums are undoubtedly far less restricted in their ability to speak their minds than the users of the traditional media” (p. 4). Thus, in this study, non-silence of the respondents is defined as individuals’ willingness to express opinion without worrying over the inability to have their say.

### **2.3. Fear of Isolation**

A primary assumption in the spiral of silence theory is that social beings are afraid of isolation and owing to such a psychological mechanism, individuals will repeatedly scan the social settings for the dynamics of public opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). Succumbing to disquietude of being secluded and ostracized, people in the minority tend to make concessions by suppressing

their opinions which are deemed as unpopular or losing public support. Conceivably, in a collectivist society like China, fear of isolation would be more perceptible, because in most cases interdependent social beings are characterized in the form of groups.

Despite the fact that fears of isolation are indispensable in the spiral of silence theory, the vast majority of studies have naturally taken the existence of fear for granted and therefore have rarely scrutinized it (Olaniran, 1994). Some new researchers have observed such conceptual defect, but they still fail to provide an agreed and unambiguous definition. For instance, it is obviously inappropriate for Neuwirth (2000) to obfuscate fear of being excluded and fear of discussion. Thus, this study will abide by Noelle-Neumann's initial conceptualization by defining fear of isolation as the nervousness of rejection by others.

Furthermore, Noelle-Neumann (1991) contended that aberrant individuals are compelled to stay reticent due to the threat of social isolation. Studies have demonstrated that with fear of isolation intensifying, the possibility of opinion enunciation will substantially decrease (e.g. Glynn & Park, 1997; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Willnat et al., 2002).

Hence, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Fear of isolation will be negatively correlated with individuals' willingness to express opinion.

### 3. Anonymity

Unlike face-to-face environments, online communication allows anonymity, which means that individuals can hide their real identity. With the condition that respondents can participate in discussions without being known or identified by name, they will be somewhat encouraged in opinion expression (Dennis, 1996). In the research of making group decisions anonymously, participants were found to offer more inquiries, critical remarks and further clarification in a nameless deliberation, compared to the situation requiring personal information submission (Jessup, Connolly & Galegher, 1990). Un-exposure of the self to others builds close ties with individuals' willingness to unveil genuine thoughts.

Hence, a proposed hypothesis is as follows:

H2: Anonymity will be positively correlated with individuals' willingness to express opinion.

In addition, respondents' estimation of the threat of isolation is subject to the state of anonymity. In daily life, respondents may be thrown into a strange state of embarrassment when they have published remarks interpreted as pointless and imbecilic, while in the context of the anonymous Internet, the risk of discomfiture drops drastically (Baltes, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer & LaGanke, 2002). Such characteristics of online communication are closely connected to the spiral of silence theory, as awkwardness is an important manifestation of fear of isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). There is a tendency for respondents suffering from intense embarrassment to silence their opinions in controversy.

Nevertheless, it was indicated by Olaniran (1994) in his research concerning the implication

of anonymity on online communication, that despite a great deal of hostile opposition, unnamed respondents were prone to speak out without displaying fear of isolation, because un-identification not only slashes conformity pressure (Nunamaker et al., 1991; Valacich et al., 1992), but also renders respondents less repressed in putting their thoughts forward (El-Shinnawy & Vinze, 1997). The reason why anonymity can alleviate fear of isolation is that undergoing such psychological fear has a prerequisite, an individual's social identity. In other words, on the condition that personal identity remains unknown by others, individuals are less afraid of being isolated. Yun and Park (2011) maintained that "the anonymous nature of many online forums made it very difficult to impose any substantial sanction on individuals who did not have any physical presence" (p. 5). From this we can extrapolate that anonymity may cast a significant influence on the relationship between fear of isolation and individuals' willingness to express their attitudes.

Therefore, a research question is proposed:

Whether fear of isolation has any impact on the relation between anonymity and the individuals' willingness of expression?

### 3.1. Perceived Opinion Congruency

The spiral of silence theory presumes that there exists a correlation between perceived opinion congruency and individuals' outspokenness. Perceived opinion congruency can be further distinguished into current opinion congruency and future opinion congruency. To be specific, current opinion congruency is a respondent's awareness of whether his stance is in line with the majority opinion among the masses. Supposing respondents consider their postures to be consistent with the current majority opinion (i.e. high current opinion congruency), they are inclined to assert their viewpoint. As for future opinion congruency, it involves respondents' awareness of whether consistency is established between their own stand and the general way in which the majority opinion develops. On the assumption that respondents have a high perception of future opinion congruency, voicing opinions will not be unbearable for these respondents. It is worth noting that the perceived viewpoints do not necessarily correspond to reality. As a consequence, misperception of a perceived consistency between a respondent's stances with the majority posture will occasionally spur the respondent to articulate. Likewise, opinion expression can be discouraged when a respondent holds a misperception that his or her personal opinion deviates from the norm (Perry & Gouzenbach, 2000).

Extant research studies have revealed that high current opinion congruency will strengthen individuals' willingness of opinion expression (Moy, Domke & Stamm, 2001; Willnat, 1996). Also, in accordance with a certain number of research studies, future opinion congruency was positively correlated with the likelihood of expressing opinion (Neuwirth, 2000; Salmon & Neuwirth, 1990; Scheufele et al., 2001).

Drawing upon the above body of literature, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H3: The more opinion congruency is perceived by individuals, the greater the willingness of individuals to express their opinions.

### 3.2. Power Distance

Power distance refers to society's inclination to endorse power disparity (Hofstede, 1980). The higher the extent to which individuals with lower social ranks consent to uneven power allocation, the more likely those individuals will be to submit to a hierarchy where everyone holds a specific position which does not need to be justified. Conversely, if power distance is minor, interpersonal distance will diminish, with social equality promoted (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). High power distance is frequently utilized to account for insufficient consultation and abounding self-censorship among individuals in East Asia (Min, 2009; Shen, Wang, Guo & Guo, 2009). According to a survey carried out in Chinese college classrooms, participants sensing high power distance were more reluctant to raise questions and make plain their ideas in comparison to those who perceived low power distance (Zhang, 2005). Similarly, it was discovered by Xie et al. (2009) that power distance was negatively associated with Chinese university students' effective communication with their instructors in a face-to-face setting.

Ho, Chen, and Sim (2013) argued that "people with high power distance orientations, who believe that the ones in power are entitled to status and privilege, may be more reluctant to speak out in public for fear of offending them and to be seen as challenging the status quo" (p. 4). This is because the social norm is customarily ordained by people in power. In contrast, "people with low power distance orientation, who tend to perceive relatively equal distribution of power and are less afraid of offending those in power, may be more comfortable to speak out" (Ho et al., 2013, p. 4). Regarding the spiral of silence theory, in an antagonistic communication background where the bulk of people oppose an individual's viewpoint, that individual would be more unwilling to express his opinion provided that he discerns higher power distance. Thus, this study speculates the following:

H4: Power distance will be negatively associated with individuals' willingness to express their opinion.

### 4. Social Context of This Study

As a broadcast medium, Sina Weibo exists in the form of microblogging, which allows users to share real-time information through text, image or video. Weibo stepped into the limelight in 2009 and within a year had reached such a height of popularity it beat "Obama" and "Swine Flu" to rank first in the 2009 top phrases list. By the first half of 2013, Weibo stood at 536 million registered users globally. Weibo users enjoy a high degree of autonomy when retrieving information, which means that they can choose who to follow and then provide their own opinion. On Weibo, each user is given an equal chance to post on any topic, irrespective of that individual's social status. Unlike traditional media, Weibo enables those individuals in lower positions to directly communicate with those in higher positions, which, to some extent, narrows the gap between different social strata. And it is noteworthy that personal information is not requisite when a user participates in discussions and posts a comment on Weibo.

The spiral of silence theory presumes that the split of public opinion occurs only when the subject being in question is morally loaded. At present, homosexuality is still a sensitive issue

in China and it was not until 1997, in which the Criminal Law was revised, that sexual practice by homosexuals was decriminalized in China (Cao & Lu, 2014). Prior to that, homosexual men would face charges of hooliganism. In April, 2001, the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders for the first time eliminated homosexuality from the list, which marked the de-pathologization of homosexuality in China. But it is worth noting that such a result was achieved almost 19 years after the United States declared that homosexuality was not a mental disorder. Before that, being gay had always been regarded as sexual perversion (Cao & Lu, 2014).

Zhang Beichuan, an expert on gay issues from Qingdao University, estimated the figure for homosexuals in China in 2014 to be 40 million, with lesbians comprising 10 million and the rest split between gays and bisexuals (Koo, Chow, Gao, Fu, Jing, Chen & Zhang, 2014). Zhang also admitted the possibility that some individuals' sexual orientation is just temporary, which means that some homosexuals may eventually become heterosexual. Even though recent years have witnessed a gradual improvement in the social status of homosexuals, gays and lesbians still find themselves in a tough survival situation. The bulk of these people are often misunderstood and discriminated against in this generally conservative society, thus continuously living with fear and shame. In 2014, a survey was conducted among well-educated homosexuals in large cities, and the results indicated that the condition of these people's psychological health was an area of concern. Suicidal thoughts were found in 35% of the respondents, with 13% having actually attempted suicide. Remarkably, the proportion of individuals who felt lonely and depressed peaked at 67%, with one respondent complaining that it is too difficult for homosexuals to be open about their sexual preference and continue to lead a normal life (Koo et al., 2014).

The survey also revealed other startling facts. Owing to severe discrimination in society, homosexuals tend to fall short of a normal social environment and good interpersonal relationships (Koo et al., 2014). As shown by the survey, 38% of respondents had suffered from physical abuse during sexual intercourse with homosexuals. And 21% of respondents had been insulted or blackmailed by other heterosexuals after their homosexual identity had been exposed. Koo et al. (2014) argued that the staggering number of injurious acts committed on homosexuals implied that this special group was seriously rejected by the masses. Such repulsion can be partly accounted for by the fact that ordinary people will immediately call to mind HIV just on the mention of homosexuals. Some people in society generally consider homosexuality as a kind of demoralization, because they believe homosexual people are notorious for promiscuous sexual behavior. Some Chinese people, especially parents, find it hard to accept gay marriage, because in Chinese tradition, males are supposed to carry on the family line. Under heavy social pressure, a considerable number of homosexuals are compelled to marry the opposite sex, only to find it torturing to fulfill their conjugal duties, such as sexual activity. For others, if they refuse such kind of marriage, they will have to constantly search for a new sexual partner. The impossibility of gay marriage renders companionship transient and fragile. This is due to the absence of legal restraint and protection of the relationship between homosexuals (Koo et al., 2014).

On July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Kevin Tsai, a Taiwan TV show host who is famous for his gay identity, talked openly of homosexuals in an online talk show broadcast via [www.iqiyi.com](http://www.iqiyi.com). Tsai claimed that homosexuals were not something scary, appealing to people for understanding and caring. However, in late August 2015, this episode of the talk show was banned by the State

Administration of Radio, Film and TV. According to the Administration, that episode was too offensive to be broadcast, because it spoke favorably of deviant homosexual relationships, which reacted against traditional moral values. As a consequence, issues concerning homosexuality were widely debated on Weibo. Hence, we decided to choose homosexual problems as the context of our study.

## 5. Method

### 5.1. Sampling

We gathered data in July, 2015 from a randomly selected sample of 500 students and alumni in one college in Zhuhai. We designed the questionnaire (see details in Appendix) and asked the 500 respondents to answer it through the website. Among all the respondents, 171 were male and 329 were female, the latter accounting for approximately 66%. The bulk of the respondents were in their adolescence (aged 18~24), with young adults (aged 25~30) comprising only 75 individuals.

Table 1. Summary Sample Statistics of Demographics

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>%</b>
<u>Gender</u>	
Male	34.2%
Female	65.8%
<u>Age</u>	
18-24	85%
25-30	15%
<u>Education</u>	
College Student	85%
Alumni	15%

*Note:* N = 500

#### 5.1.1. Measurement

##### 5.1.1.1. Individuals' Willingness to Express Opinion

To test individuals' willingness to verbalize their opinions about homosexuality on Weibo, respondents were asked on a five-point scale (1 = "strongly disagree", 5 = "strongly agree") to what extent they agree with the statement that they will participate in a discussion about homosexuals given that all other Weibo users are strangers. This six-item measurement was developed from Ho, Chen and Sim (2013). To scrutinize respondents' reactions in such a scenario, we further asked about the likelihood of them lying about their real thoughts, giving neutral comments and remaining silent. For example: "I will discuss with Weibo users my opinion about homosexuals", "I will say I agree with users in the majority who are against



homosexuals even though I actually disagree with them” and “I will give neutral comments without revealing what I really think”.

A factor analysis (principal component Oblimin rotation, eigenvalue > 1) yielded a single factor, accounting for 80.16 percent of the variance. Internal reliability was adequate for the six items ( $\alpha = .949$ ). We labeled the factor “willingness to express opinion” for subsequent analysis.

#### **5.1.1.2. Fear of Isolation**

Fear of isolation was measured with five items and developed from Ho, Chen and Sim (2013). Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of consonance with the following examples on a five-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree”, 5 = “strongly agree”): 1) “On Weibo, I worry about being isolated if people disapprove of my opinion about homosexuals”, 2) “On Weibo, I tend to silence my honest thoughts when there is a risk of being isolated if other people knew my opinion”, 3) “On Weibo, I do not enjoy arguing over controversial issues”, and 4) “On Weibo, I attempt to evade getting into controversy”. The items were averaged to create a composite index, with a higher score denoting higher level of fear of isolation. One factor was yielded, accounting for 84.72 percent of the variance with high reliability ( $\alpha = .953$ ).

#### **5.1.1.3. Anonymity**

When measuring anonymity, we employed a group of five items from a scale, developed from Neuwirth, Frederick, and Mayo (2007): 1) “I am more willing to express my opinion in an anonymous setting”, 2) “I will generate more direct and critical comment in an anonymous setting”, 3) “I am less afraid of being isolated in an anonymous setting”, 4) “Conformity pressure decreases in an anonymous setting”, and 5) “If Weibo requires real-name registration, I will be less likely to post messages”. Respondents indicated their agreement with the statements on a five-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree”, 5 = “strongly agree”) and all scores were averaged to create a composite index. For anonymity, there is one factor output, accounting for 93.02 percent of the variance with a high reliability value ( $\alpha = .981$ ).

#### **5.1.1.4. Perceived Opinion Congruency**

In our study, perceived opinion congruency is further subdivided into perceived current opinion congruency and perceived future opinion congruency. Perceived current opinion congruency was tested in the following procedure. This measurement was developed from Neuwirth, Frederick, and Mayo (2007). Firstly, respondents were asked to choose their stands on homosexuality. “Oppose”, “Neutral” and “Favor” was coded as -1, 0 and 1 respectively. Next, respondents were required to estimate the current situation of public opinion towards homosexuals on Weibo. Three options were provided, which included “A majority oppose homosexuals” (coded as “1”), “Attitudes towards homosexuals are split evenly between those who favor and those who oppose” (coded as “2”) and “A majority favor homosexuals” (coded as “3”). To gauge perceived future opinion congruency, respondents were asked whether the

majority opinion on Weibo will tend towards favoring homosexuals (coded as “1”), towards opposing homosexuals (coded as “2”) or no change will be witnessed in the overall opinions towards homosexuals (coded as “3”). The factor analysis showed that perceived opinion congruency yielded one factor, accountings for 96.85 percent of the variance. The internal reliability was more than adequate ( $\alpha = .984$ ).

#### **5.1.1.5. Power Distance**

Power distance was a composite measure developed from Neuwirth, Frederick, and Mayo (2007) with five items: 1) “People in higher positions should make most decisions about controversial issues without consulting people in lower positions”, 2) “People in higher positions should not ask the opinions of people in lower positions too frequently”, 3) “People in higher positions do not need to interact with people in lower positions”, 4) “On Weibo, I do not perceive obvious distance between people in higher positions and people in lower positions” and 5) “On Weibo, I dare to challenge people in higher positions when their opinions are inconsistent with mine”. For each item, respondents were asked to mark their level of agreement on a five-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree”, 5 = “strongly agree”). In the factor analysis, the variance for the only one factor was computed as 88.34% ( $\alpha = .964$ ).

#### **5.1.1.6. Use of Weibo and Control Measures**

Pursuant to Noelle-Neumann (1974), exposure to mass media is of considerable effect on individuals’ perception of the public opinion climate. Therefore, our study specially measures respondents’ use of Weibo. Respondents were inquired about how long they have been using Weibo, how many hours in total they spend on Weibo every day, as well as how often they post a message on Weibo.

#### **5.1.1.7. Demographics**

In addition to the aforementioned variables, demographic factors were included, like age (measured in two-year increments) and gender (1 = male; 2 = female). Since all of our respondents were undergraduates and graduates, income, marital status and occupation were not tested as significant factors.

## **5.2. Results**

### **5.2.1. Predicting Individual’s Willingness to Express Opinion (H1~H4)**

As can be seen in our 500 samples, females in comparison with males showed more interest to express their opinions about homosexuality ( $\beta = .173, p < .001$ ). Younger respondents exuded a stronger willingness to share their thoughts with others ( $\beta = -.214, p < .001$ ). As such, gender and age significantly predicted an individual’s willingness to express opinion.

Several regression analyses were performed to test the predictors. And as predicted, intense

fear of isolation would hinder individuals from verbalizing their viewpoint ( $\beta = .491, p < .001$ ). H1 was fully supported.

As another strong predictor, anonymity was closely associated with an individual's willingness of opinion expression ( $\beta = .148, p < .001$ ). Also, those who perceived higher opinion congruency, were more likely to comment on gay issues ( $\beta = .328, p < .001$ ). Power distance exerted an impact on respondents' inclination to voice their opinions ( $\beta = .170, p < .001$ ), which lent support to H4. As revealed by the statistics, H2, H3 and H4 were fully supported.

Table 2. Factors Predicting Individuals' Outspokenness

Factors	$\beta$	$r$
Gender	.173***	.283
Age	-.214***	.283
Fear of Isolation	.491***	.960
Perceived Opinion Congruency	.328***	.971
Power Distance	.170***	.972
Anonymity	.004	.973

Notes: Entries are standardized OLS regression beta coefficients ( $N = 500$ ). All figures controlled for demographics. # $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

### 5.2.2. Fear of Isolation as the Mediator between Anonymity and Willingness to Express Opinion

According to the regression results with anonymity as the independent variable and individuals' willingness to express opinion as the dependent variable,  $\beta$  was calculated as .925\*\*\*. When fear of isolation entered in the regression analysis, that  $\beta$  dropped drastically to .148\*\*\*. This indicated that fear of isolation served as a crucial variable which mediated the relationship between anonymity and individuals' willingness to express opinion.

Table 3. Mediation Effect

Regression Analysis	$\beta$
Anonymity → Opinion Expression	.925***
Anonymity → Fear of isolation	.949***
Anonymity, Fear of isolation → Opinion Expression	.148***

Notes: Entries are standardized OLS regression beta coefficients ( $N = 500$ ). All figures controlled for demographics. # $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

## 6. Conclusion and Discussion

On the whole, this study authenticated that individuals' likelihood of opinion expression is

subject to fear of isolation, perceived opinion congruency, anonymity and power distance. Gender and age also exerted significant influence on individuals' outspokenness. It is noteworthy that fear of isolation mediated the influence of anonymity on opinion expression.

In addition to fear of isolation and perceived opinion congruency, anonymity and power distance were proven to be new explanatory predictors of the spiral of silence theory.

Traditionally, fear of isolation and perceived opinion congruency are two crucial factors of individuals' willingness to express opinion. Consistent with previous findings, this study shows that fear of isolation was negatively correlated with opinion expression, while perceived opinion congruency displayed a positive correlation. As hypothesized, when respondents were aware that they might be isolated if they were in dissonance with others on Weibo, they inclined to silence their genuine thoughts. It is worth noting that a sizeable portion of respondents preferred to avoid controversies whenever possible. This highlighted the significant impact that fear of isolation exerted on individuals' outspokenness. As for perceived opinion congruency, on knowing that their opinions were in the majority, respondents became less reluctant to comment on controversial issues. And respondents not only paid attention to the current opinion climate, they also estimated how public opinion would develop, because whether their views could remain favorable would directly influence respondents' willingness of expression.

However, according to our study, because real-name registration was not requisite on Weibo, the assumed relation between fear of isolation and individuals' outspokenness in the spiral of silence theory was altered. It was discovered in previous studies that specific identity was the prerequisite of experiencing fear of exclusion. Spears and Lea (1994) once developed a model about social identity and de-individuation, in order to clarify the influence of anonymity on fear of isolation in computer-mediated communication. What was suggested by the model was that being anonymous considerably weakened identity and awareness of isolation, which resulted in a decline in conformity to social norms. Therefore, when respondents were able to join in discussions on Weibo and simultaneously keep their personal information undisclosed, they would dare to generate more direct and critical comments without regard to conformity pressure. In this case, fear of isolation exists as a mediator in the relation between anonymity and opinion expression. Fear about becoming socially isolated was significantly weakened by anonymization, which in turn encouraged individuals to reveal their real thoughts.

Power distance was negatively associated with individuals' willingness to express opinion, consistent with findings from extant studies. Specifically, respondents claimed that they could still perceive obvious distance on Weibo between people in higher positions and people in lower positions, as a result of which respondents did not dare to challenge the opinions of those in higher positions. Quite a few respondents contended that people with more power could make most of the decisions about controversial issues, without listening to the views of people with less power. To sum up, power distance perceived on Weibo would hinder individuals from verbalizing their points of view. Also, in accordance with our findings, female and younger respondents tended to have a stronger willingness to express their opinions.

Maturing in the conventional media settings, the spiral of silence theory posits that "people who have believed that they hold a minority viewpoint on a public issue will remain in the background where their communication will be restrained; those who believe that they hold a majority viewpoint will be more encouraged to speak" (West & Turner, 2010, p. 14). The

Internet age is characterized by a higher degree of participation, which means that rather than passively receive information, an audience can exercise initiative to publicize their opinions, even when those opinions are in the minority. If dissenting viewpoints are accepted by an increasing number of individuals, they are highly likely to alter public opinion. Specifically, herd mentality is no longer prominent on the Internet when controversies about public affairs are sparked. Individuals nowadays tend not to hide their stances and preferences, growing more courageous to challenge mainstream opinion. Since the vocal minorities can no longer stand silent, there is a possibility that their flow of opinion would gain ground as the reality of the situation deepens. Resulting from fragmentation, instantaneity and decentralization of mass media, the theoretical background of the spiral of silence theory is no longer preserved, which may render the theory not completely applicable in cyberspace.

The findings in our study have several implications regarding the spiral of silence theory building. First, this study implies that compared to face-to-face communication, the relationship between individuals' willingness to express opinion, fear of isolation and perceived opinion congruency in a computer-mediated environment are more complicated. Anonymity, as the unique feature of cyberspace, makes individuals' communicative behavior vastly different. Specifically, Internet users neither have a real and physical identity to sense conformity pressure, nor do they get any information about whom they are interacting with. This largely affects individuals' estimation of the threat of ostracization. In other words, there is the possibility that individuals, being able to conceal their personal details, will generate ideas which are deviant from or conflicting with the majority stand without feeling the fear of isolation. Next, our findings serve as an expansion to the spiral of silence theory by proving that in addition to fear of isolation and perceived opinion congruency, opinion expression can also be influenced by other new factors such as power distance. And this also calls the theory into question over whether it has over-simplified the whole process of how public opinion forms, changes and becomes reinforced. Finally, on a practical level, our research data demonstrates that the majority of the respondents support the gay community, and they also believe that the climate of opinion will develop in a positive direction. This kind of public opinion would be of great reference value for formulating policies that respect and protect the rights of gay people.

Nevertheless, there exist several limitations in this study which should be indicated. Firstly, for data collection, we used a questionnaire instead of any designed experiment. In comparison to experiment, questionnaire is not able to replicate the computer-mediated environment in which respondents obtain information and conduct communication. Consequently, what we could gather was not the respondents' instant thoughts and reactions. Such respondents have to either recall their memories or suppose they were using Weibo when filling out the questionnaire. To alleviate such drawbacks, future research should replicate this study by changing the research method into experiment, which can better validate the causal relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. Secondly, cultural propensity, such as collectivism and saving face, are shown to be influential to human behavior, yet the study did not manage to measure cultural differences at the individual-level. And since cultural predispositions vary from country to country, it is still uncertain whether our findings can be generalized globally. Therefore, whether within-country or cross-nation, future research may consider taking cultural factors into consideration when constructing the theoretical framework.

Thirdly, given that we have solely chosen the issue of homosexuality as the research background, fear of isolation, one of the independent variables, is in fact conceptualized as fear of isolation evoked by a specific topic, instead of the general fear of isolation. In other words, if the context of the study is changed from homosexuals to other areas, it is still undetermined whether the significant correlation between fear of isolation and other variables will remain unchanged. Since the spiral of silence phenomenon is not limited to any particular morally-loaded issue, in order to better test the validity of the theory in computer-mediated communication, future research should increase the diversity of chosen topics to minimize errors in the stage of conceptualization.

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### Appendix

#### Questionnaire

##### Part One: Weibo Use

1. Do you use Weibo?
  - 1) No
  - 2) Yes
  
2. How long have you been using Weibo?
  - 1) Less than 1 year
  - 2) 1~2 years (include 1 year)
  - 3) 2~3 years (include 2 years)
  - 4) More than 3 years (include 3 years)
  
3. How many hours in total do you spend on Weibo every day?
  - 1) Fewer than 2 hours
  - 2) 2~5 hours (include 2 hours)
  - 3) More than 5 hours (include 5 hours)
  
4. How often do you post a message on Weibo?
  - 1) Never
  - 2) Seldom



- 3) Sometimes
- 4) Often
- 5) Always

Part Two: Opinion Expression

5. I will express an opinion to unknown individuals on Weibo, which includes leaving comments, forward messages and clicking the “like” button.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

6. I will discuss with Weibo users about homosexuals.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

7. I will verbalize my frank opinion about homosexuals on Weibo.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

8. I will say I agree with users in the majority who are against homosexuals even though I actually disagree with them.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

9. I will give neutral comments without revealing what I really think.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

10. I will say nothing about homosexuals on Weibo.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

Part Three: Fear of Isolation

11. On Weibo, I worry about being isolated if people disapprove of my opinion about homosexuals.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

12. On Weibo, I tend to silence my honest thoughts when there is a risk of being isolated if other people know my opinion.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

13. On Weibo, I enjoy arguing over controversial issues.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

14. Arguing over controversial issues gives me a deeper insight of those insights.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

15. On Weibo, I attempt to evade getting into controversy.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral

- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

Part Four: Express Opinion in An Anonymous Setting

16. I am more willing to express my opinion in an anonymous setting.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

17. I will generate more direct and critical comment in an anonymous setting.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

18. I am less afraid of being isolated in an anonymous setting.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

19. Conformity pressure decreases in an anonymous setting.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

20. If Weibo requires real-name registration, I will be less likely to post messages.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

Part Five: Attitude towards Homosexuality

21. What would you consider to be your stand towards homosexuals?

- 1) I favor homosexuals
- 2) I oppose homosexuals

22.1 On Weibo, I prefer to read messages opposing homosexuals.

- 1) No
- 2) Yes

22.2 On Weibo, I prefer to read messages favoring homosexuals.

- 1) No
- 2) Yes

23. Thinking about those Weibo users you interact with, which of the following do you think best describes the current situation of public opinion?

- 1) A majority oppose homosexuals
- 2) Attitudes towards homosexuals are split evenly between those who favor and those who oppose
- 3) A majority favor homosexuals

24. Thinking about those Weibo users you interact with, which of the following do you think best describes the future development of public opinion?

- 1) The majority opinion is tending towards opposing homosexuals
- 2) No change will be witnessed in the overall opinions towards homosexuals
- 3) The majority opinion is tending towards favoring homosexuals

#### Part Six: Keep up with information on Weibo

25. The majority information I receive is consonant with my opinion.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

26. I will search for attitude-consistent information to confirm my stand.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

27. I do not want to read any counter-attitudinal information.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree

- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

28. When I can easily seek out large amounts of attitude-consistent information, I will think that I am in the majority.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

29. The amount of attitude-consistent information I find will increase my willingness to express my opinion.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

Part Seven: View on Power Distance

30. People in higher positions should most decisions about controversial issues.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

31. People in higher positions should not ask the opinions of people in lower positions too frequently.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

32. People in higher positions do not need to interact with people in lower positions.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

33. On Weibo, I do not perceive obvious distance between people in higher positions and people in lower positions.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

34. On Weibo, I dare to challenge people in higher positions when their opinions are inconsistent with mine.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

Part Eight: Communication Apprehension

35. I avoid speaking in public if possible.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

36. My heart will beat faster than usual when I am speaking in public.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

37. I will feel awkward when I am talking.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

38. My words will become confused and jumbled when I am speaking.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral

- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

39. I feel more relaxed when verbalizing my opinion on Weibo, compared to speaking in public.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

40. I prefer to express my opinion to others on Weibo rather than face-to-face.

- 1) Strongly disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

#### Part Nine: Gender and Age

41. Gender

- 1) Male
- 2) Female

42. Age

- 1) 18~24
- 2) 25~30

### 調查問卷

#### 第一部份：微博使用

1. 你使用新浪微博嗎？

- 1) 不使用
- 2) 使用

2. 你使用微博多久了？

- 1) 1年以下
- 2) 1~2年（含1年）
- 3) 2~3年（含2年）
- 4) 3年以上（含3年）

3. 你一般每天會花多少時間上微博？

- 1) 1小時以下
- 2) 1~2小時（含1小時）

- 3) 2~3小時 (含2小時)
- 4) 3小時以上 (含3小時)

4. 你在微博上發布信息的頻率是？

- 1) 從不
- 2) 很少
- 3) 有時
- 4) 常常
- 5) 總是

## 第二部份：表達個人觀點

5. 我會在微博上向一個陌生的用戶表達自己的觀點，其途徑包括評論、轉發或點贊。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

6. 我會在微博上和其他用戶討論自己關於同性戀的看法。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

7. 我會在微博上發表自己對同性戀的真實看法。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

8. 當大多數微博用戶都對同性戀表示贊同或反對時，我也會同意他們的觀點，即使那不是我自己的真實看法。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

9. 對於同性戀這個問題，我會傾向於在微博上發表中立的看法，而不去表達自己真正的立場。



- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

10. 對於同性戀這個問題，我會傾向於不發表任何看法。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

### 第三部份：言論孤立的害怕程度

11. 在微博上，當別人不贊同我對同性戀的看法時，我會害怕被孤立。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

12. 在微博上，當知道別人有可能會因為我的觀點而孤立我時，我會傾向於不說出自己的真實看法。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

13. 我喜歡在微博上和別人討論有爭議的問題。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

14. 和別人討論有爭議的問題能夠深刻我對那些問題的認識。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

15. 在微博上，我盡可能避免與他人爭論。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

#### 第四部份：匿名情況下的觀點表達

16. 我更願意在匿名的情況下去表達我的觀點。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

17. 我更容易會在匿名的情況下表達直接和批判性的觀點。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

18. 在匿名情況下，我不會那麼擔心被孤立。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

19. 在匿名情況下，服從多數人意見的壓力會相對比較小。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

20. 如果微博採取實名制，我可能會減少我發佈的信息。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

### 第五部份：對同性戀的看法

21. 我對同性戀的立場？

- 1) 反對 (轉至22.1)
- 2) 中立
- 3) 支持 (轉至22.2)

22.1 在微博上，我傾向於關注反對同性戀的觀點。

- 1) 否
- 2) 是

22.2 在微博上，我傾向於關注贊成同性戀的觀點。

- 1) 否
- 2) 是

23. 對於你所關注的微博圈子，你認為下列哪一個選項最貼切地描述了他們對同性戀的態度？

- 1) 大多數反對
- 2) 支持者跟反對者持平
- 3) 大多數支持

24. 你預測你的微博圈子中的人群，在未來將對同性戀秉持怎麼樣的態度？

- 1) 更多人傾向於反對
- 2) 與現況沒有太大變化
- 3) 更多人傾向於支持

### 第六部份：關注微博信息

25. 大多數我關注的信息都是與我觀點相符的。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

26. 我會刻意去尋找支持我觀點的信息。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

27. 我不太想看到與我觀點相斥的信息。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

28. 當我能輕鬆地找到大量與我觀點相符的信息時，我會認為自己秉持着主流觀點。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

29. 當我能找到大量與我觀點相符的信息時，我會更願意表達自己的看法。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

#### 第七部份：社會地位差距

30. 具有爭議性的問題應該由社會地位高的人作決定。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

31. 社會地位高的人不需要頻繁地詢問社會地位低的人的看法。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

32. 社會地位高的人沒有必要與社會地位低的人交流觀點。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

33. 在微博上，我不能察覺到用戶之間的社會地位差距。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

34. 在微博中，我更有勇氣去反駁那些與我觀點不相符的高社會地位人群。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

#### 第八部份：交流恐懼

35. 我盡可能避免在公眾場合發言。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

36. 當我在公眾場合發言時，我會心跳加快。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

37. 當我在公眾場合發言時，我會感到尷尬。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

38. 當我在公眾場合發言時，我的語言會容易變得混亂、含糊。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

39. 比起公眾場合，在微博上發表意見會使我更放鬆。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

40. 比起面對面交談，我更願意通過微博向別人表達我的看法。

- 1) 非常不符合
- 2) 比較不符合
- 3) 難以確定
- 4) 比較符合
- 5) 非常符合

#### 第九部份：性別與年齡

41. 性別

- 1) 男
- 2) 女

42. 年齡

- 1) 18~24
- 2) 25~30