

MASTER'S THESIS

Speaking out via internet?: linking spiral of silence theory to the public opinion expression

Zhao, Xinyan

Date of Award:
2011

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

Speaking Out via Internet?
Linking Spiral of Silence Theory to the Public Opinion Expression
in China

ZHAO Xinyan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Philosophy

Principal Supervisor: Prof. HUANG Yu

Hong Kong Baptist University

July 2011

ABSTRACT

Public deliberation and reciprocal dialogues constitute the core elements shaping the free and open public sphere (Habermas, 1962). In the Internet age, computer-mediated communication (CMC) is said to open up new possibilities to citizen discussion and political exchange in an authoritative society. But dysfunctional social-psychological mechanisms sometimes obstruct the ideal public exchange, for instance individuals choose to be silent when they face incongruent majority opinions.

This study applied the theoretical perspective of spiral of silence to explain the public opinion expression in China. Firstly, it paid special attention to the impact of media on public opinion in the Chinese social-cultural context, and explored the cultural-specific mechanisms underlying the conformity process in China. Secondly, it contextualized the public opinion in an Internet era and tried to address the following question: does computer-mediated communication encourage people to speak out more in public communication setting.

The results suggested that peer opinion climate impacts the respondents' talk participation. The effect is comparatively marginal, and mediated by self-efficacy and communication apprehension. Regarding on the relationship between media and public opinion, the results indicated that newspaper reliance is positively linked to talk participation and opinion expression in China. And Internet reliance is related to opinion expression. There existed a somehow complex relationship between media credibility and opinion congruency. Respondents assigning high credibility perceptions to the party newspaper tend to exhibit lower opinion congruency with the peer opinion climate. And respondents assigning high credibility evaluations to the party TV and oversea media tend to exhibit higher opinion congruency with the peer opinion climate.

With the employment of a between-subject experimental design (FTF vs. CMC), the study also provided an answer to the question on the empowering role of Internet on public opinion expression among the elite college students in China. Respondents randomly assigned to the computer-mediated communication (CMC) scenario showed less likelihood to enter the talk and express their views, comparing to the respondents in the face-to-face (FTF) setting. And respondents in the CMC setting exhibited lower self-efficacy and higher communication apprehension. The findings provide conditional answer for the Internet's empowering role in public opinion expression.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	i
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	x
LIST OF APPENDICES	xi
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW	6
2.1 Theory of Spiral of silence	6
2.1.1 The opinion climate	6
2.1.2 Fear of isolation	7
2.1.3 Mass media and public opinion	8
2.1.4 Additional factors influencing public opinion	9
2.2 Development of spiral of silence theory	10
2.2.1 Opinion climate at different levels	10
2.2.2 Challenge of “fear of isolation”	11

2.2.3 Critiques of consonant media hypothesis	12
2.3 Spiral of silence testing in various cultural contexts	13
2.3.1 Spiral of silence testing in China.....	13
2.3.2 Face concern in the Chinese context	14
2.3.3 Empirical tests of face concern	15
2.4 Spiral of silence in CMC setting.....	15
2.4.1 Internet and political system – two perspectives.....	16
2.4.2 Theories related to CMC scenario.....	17
2.4.3 Empirical test of the CMC scenario in spiral of silence study	19
CHAPTER III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	21
3.1 Levels of opinion climate	21
3.2 Forms of opinion expression.....	22
3.2 Media reliance, diversification and credibility	23
3.2.1 Media reliance	23
3.2.2 Media diversification and media credibility.....	24
3.3 Mechanisms underlying the process	25
3.3.1 Self-efficacy	25
3.3.2 Communication apprehension.....	26
3.4 The computer-mediated setting	27

3.4.1 Empowering role of Internet in China.....	27
3.4.2 Theories related to the empowering Internet.....	28
CHAPTER IV. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS AND QUESTIONS.....	33
4.1 The hypotheses.....	33
4.1.1 Opinion climate and public opinion	33
4.1.2 Media use & perception and public opinion	34
4.1.3 Self-efficacy and public opinion	34
4.1.4 Communication apprehension and public opinion.....	35
4.1.5 Communication setting and public opinion.....	35
4.2 Research questions	36
4.2.1 Media perception and public opinion.....	36
4.2.2 Face concern and public opinion.....	36
CHAPTER V. BACKGROUND AND ISSUE USED IN THE STUDY	37
5.1 Internet development and use in China	37
5.2 Issue used in current study	39
CHAPTER VI. METHODOLOGY	41
6.1 Participants	41
6.2 Design	43
6.3 Procedure	43

6.4 Measurement	44
CHAPTER VII. RESULTS	49
7.1 Media and opinion congruency	49
7.1.1 Media reliance, diversification and credibility	49
7.1.2 The link between media perception and opinion congruency	49
7.2 Predictors of public opinion expression	51
7.2.1 Summary of regression results	52
7.2.2 Media reliance and public opinion	53
7.2.3 Opinion congruency and public opinion	53
7.2.4 Self-efficacy, CA and public opinion	55
7.2.5 Face concern and public opinion	56
7.3 The moderating effect — CMC vs. FTF	57
7.3.1 T-test results	58
7.3.2 Results of the interactions (moderators)	58
7.4 Mediator: self-efficacy and communication apprehension	59
CHAPTER XIII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	62
8.1 Discussion of results	62
8.1.1 Media and opinion congruency	62
8.1.2 Media reliance and public opinion	64

8.1.3 The opinion congruency and public opinion.....	65
8.1.4 Analysis of the social-psychological factors.....	67
8.1.5 Analysis of the t-test: CMC vs. FTF setting.....	69
8.1.6 Analysis of the moderating role of communication setting	71
8.1.7 Analysis of the mediating role of self-efficacy	76
8.2 Conclusion.....	78
8.3 Limitation.....	79
8.4 Future direction	81
REFERENCES	84
APPENDICES 1	102
APPENDICES 2	108
CURRICULUM VITAE	114