

## MASTER'S THESIS

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

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

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## 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.

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