



INTERNET AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA USE AND  
PUBLIC OPINION FORMATION: A TEST OF THE  
ASSUMPTIONS OF SPIRAL OF SILENCE THEORY

BY

SADOLLAH AHRARI

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Human  
Sciences (Communication)

Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and  
Human Sciences  
International Islamic University  
Malaysia

MAY 2010

## ABSTRACT

This study has examined the assumptions of the Spiral of Silence Theory in the presence of Internet use variables on a probability sample of 312 undergraduate students of the University of Malaya. The study adopted cross-sectional research design using survey method. The respondents' own opinion, perception of current and future climates of opinion, and willingness to express own opinion were tapped on the controversial issue of using English as a medium for teaching Math and Science in schools in Malaysia, on a 7-point scale. The respondents' Internet usage, exposure to TV news and informational programs, and newspaper reading patterns also were measured at an ordinal level measurement. In addition, the data were collected on respondents' fear of isolation using a 10-item index on a 7-point scale. After the data preparation, the data were analyzed using SPSS software, and relevant statistical methods such as correlation, and linear regression were used to test the hypotheses of the study. Based on the Spiral of Silence and Internet use literature, six hypotheses were tested. It was hypothesized that traditional media use will relate with own opinion, opinion climate, and opinion expression. The study found a partial support for this hypothesis, with TV news & informational programs relating with own opinion and opinion expression, and newspaper reading relating with own opinion and opinion climate. In addition, of the four Internet use variables, blog use had a significant relationship with own opinion and opinion climate, and online news use related with opinion expression. Blog use also moderated the relationship between TV news & informational programs and opinion climate. Contrary to our expectation, opinion climate and fear of isolation variables had no relationship with opinion expression. The implications of these findings are discussed from the stand point of the conceptualization of the Spiral of Silence phenomena.

## ملخص البحث

هذه الدراسة قد نظرت في افتراضات نظرية دوامة الصمت (حلزونية الصمت) مع وجود متغيرات استخدام الإنترنت. تكونت عينات هذه الرسالة من ٣١٢ طالب وطالبة في المرحلة الجامعية (البكالوريوس) من جامعة مالايا. اعتمدت الدراسة على الدراسات المقطعية (المستعرضة) لتصميم البحث باستخدام أسلوب المسح. استبانة الرسالة الرأي الخاص بالشخص، التصور عن المناخ الحالي والمستقبلي للرأي العام، والرغبة في التعبير عن الرأي الشخصي بشأن قضية استخدام اللغة الإنجليزية في تدريس الرياضيات والعلوم في المدارس في ماليزيا- التي أثار الجدل بين الناس- على قياس مع ٧ نقاط. تم قياس كمية استخدام المجيبين للإنترنت، والأخبار التلفزيونية والبرامج الإعلامية، إضافة إلى كمية قراءتهم للصحف المحلية على مستوى ترتيب في القياس. وفضلا عن ذلك، تم جمع البيانات على خوف المجيبين من العزلة باستخدام مؤشر يحتوي على ١٠ أسئلة على قياس مع ٧ نقاط. تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام البرنامج الإحصائي للعلوم الاجتماعية (spss)، باستخدام الأساليب الإحصائية ذات الصلة - مثل تحليل الارتباط وتحليل التراجع - لاختبار فرضيات الدراسة. تم اختبار فرضيات ست التي اقترحت بعد دراسة البحوث الموجودة عن نظرية دوامة الصمت والإنترنت. كان قد اقترح أنه هناك ارتباط بين استخدام وسائل الإعلام التقليدية (التلفاز والصحيفة) والرأي الخاص بالشخص، وأيضا بينه وبين التصور عن المناخ الحالي والمستقبلي للرأي العام، وأيضا الرغبة في التعبير عن الرأي الشخصي. النتائج تبين أنه هناك ارتباط بين استخدام التلفاز والرأي الشخصي وأيضا الرغبة في التعبير عن الرأي الشخصي. هناك أيضا كان يوجد ارتباط بين قراءة الصحف والرأي الشخصي والتصور عن المناخ للرأي العام. بالنسبة للمتغيرات الأربعة لاستخدام الإنترنت، قد وجدت البحث العلاقة بين استخدام المدونة والرأي الشخصي كما أنها وجدت العلاقة بين استخدام المدونة والتصور عن المناخ للرأي العام. هذه الدراسة أيضا قد عثرت على علاقة إيجابية ملحوظة بين استخدام الاخبارية على الانترنت والرغبة في التعبير عن الرأي الخاص بالشخص. بالنسبة لتأثير الإنترنت على العلاقة بين استخدام وسائل الإعلام التقليدية والتصور عن المناخ للرأي العام، فاستخدام المدونة قد غير الارتباط بين استخدام التلفاز مع التصور عن المناخ للرأي العام. خلافا للانتظار، ما وجدت الدراسة أي رابطة بين كل من متغيرات التصور عن المناخ للرأي العام (المناخ الحالي والمستقبلي) مع الرغبة في التعبير عن الرأي الشخصي، كما أنها لم تجد الدراسة أي علاقة مهمة بين الخوف من العزلة الاجتماعي والرغبة في التعبير عن الرأي الشخصي. هذه النتائج قد نوقشت من وجهة نظر نظرية دوامة الصمت.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

.....  
Fazal Rahim Khan  
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

.....  
Saodah Wok  
Examiner

This dissertation was submitted to the Department of Communication and is accepted as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

.....  
Norbaiduri Ruslan  
Head, Department of Communication

This dissertation was submitted to the Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences and is accepted as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

.....  
Badri Najib Zubair  
Dean,  
Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed  
Knowledge and Human Sciences

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the results of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for my other degree at IIUM or other institutions.

Sadollah Ahrari

Signature.....

Date.....

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

**DECLARATION OF COPYRIGHT AND AFFIRMATION  
OF FAIR USE OF UNPUBLISHED RESEARCH**

Copyright © 2010 by Sadollah Ahrari. All rights reserved.

**INTERNET USE AND PUBLIC OPINION FORMATION: A TEST OF  
THE ASSUMPTIONS OF SPIRAL OF SILENCE THEORY**

No part of this unpublished research may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without prior written permission of the copyright holder except as provided below.

1. Any material contained in or derived from this unpublished research may only be used by others in their writing with due acknowledgement.
2. IIUM or its library will have the right to make and transmit copies (print or electronic) for institutional and academic purposes.
3. The IIUM library will have the right to make, store in a retrieval system and supply copies of this unpublished research if requested by other universities and research libraries.

Affirmed by Sadollah Ahrari

.....  
Signature

.....  
Date

**This study is dedicated to:**

MY PARENTS;

رَبِّ اَرْحَمَهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرًا

*“O my Lord! Bestow your mercy on them, even as they affectionately reared me in childhood”  
(Quran, 17:24).*

MY WIFE, AND CHILDREN: habibeh, Mos’ab, and Mobina

AND TO MY LECTURERS, from Islamic school to bachelor  
level, and to my masters degree.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All praise and gratitude go to ALLAH (sw), the Almighty and the most Benevolent Lord of the Worlds. In Him alone do I put all my trust, and from Him alone do I gain all my strength, inspiration, and guidance. May His eternal peace and blessings be upon His slave and Messenger, Mohammad, and upon the members of his household.

After having said that, I am deeply indebted to *Prof. Dr. Fazal Rahim Khan*, my supervisor, who indeed was an utmost help in completing this dissertation.

My gratitude is also due to The Higher Institute of Islamic Studies For Ahlulsunna Waljama'a in South of Iran for providing me with an opportunity to further my studies. In this regards, I am particularly indebted to *Sheikh Abdulkarim Ahmad Mohammadi*, the head of the Institute, and *Sheikh Seyed Ahmad Yeganeh Qalati*, the director of the department of Fiqh, for their compassion, understanding, and support.

My sincere appreciations are due *Sheikh Shams al-Din Ahrari* and *Sheikh Mohammad Hosein Mohammadi* for their father-like encouragement and invaluable help in enabling me complete my degree, and also to my beloved Iranian colleagues and friends at Andisheh Society, the IIUM chapter.

At the end, I would like to thank the IIUM family, lecturers and management, for seeing me through to this stage.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Arabic Abstract .....	iii
Approval Page .....	iv
Declaration Page .....	v
Copyright Page .....	vi
Dedication .....	vii
Acknowledgements .....	viii
List of Tables .....	xii
List of Figures .....	xiv
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction .....	1
1.2 Background of the Study .....	1
1.3 Statement of the Problem .....	3
1.4 Research Questions .....	6
1.5 Objectives of the Study .....	7
1.6 Significance of the Study .....	8
<b>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	9
2.2 Public Opinion and Opinion Expression .....	9
2.2.1 Importance of Opinion Expression .....	9
2.2.2 Role of the Internet in Opinion Expression .....	10
2.3 Relevance of the Test of Spiral of Silence Theory on the Issue of “Using English as a Medium for Teaching Math and Science in Schools” .....	11
2.4 Conceptual Framework .....	12
2.4.1 Opinion Expression .....	12
2.4.2 Factors Affecting Opinion Expression .....	13
2.4.2.1 Internet Use .....	13
2.4.2.2 Traditional Media Use .....	14
2.4.2.3 Own Opinion .....	15
2.4.2.4 Perception of Opinion Climate .....	15
2.4.2.5 Opinion Congruence .....	16
2.4.2.6 Fear of Isolation .....	16
2.5 Theoretical Framework .....	17
2.5.1 Background and Definition of the Spiral of Silence Theory .....	17
2.5.2 Elements and Assumptions of the Theory .....	19
2.5.3 Development of the Theory .....	21
2.5.3.1 Mass Media and the Spiral of Silence .....	22
2.5.3.2 Internet Use and the Spiral of Silence .....	24
2.5.3.3 Fear of isolation and the Spiral of Silence .....	26
2.5.3.4 Climate of Opinion and the Spiral of Silence .....	28
2.6 Hypotheses of the Study .....	29

<b>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>31</b>
3.1 Introduction.....	31
3.2 Locale of Study.....	31
3.3 Research Design.....	31
3.4 Sampling Procedures.....	32
3.5 Operational Definitions.....	33
3.5.1 Opinion Expression.....	33
3.5.2 Internet Use.....	34
3.5.3 Traditional Mass Media Use.....	34
3.5.4 Own Opinion.....	35
3.5.5 Perception of Opinion Climate.....	35
3.5.6 Opinion Congruence.....	36
3.5.7 Fear of Isolation.....	36
3.6 Research Instrument.....	37
3.7 Reliability and Validity of Measures.....	39
3.7.1 Measures' Reliability.....	40
3.7.2 Measures' Validity.....	42
3.8 Data Analysis Procedures.....	42
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>44</b>
4.1 Introduction.....	44
4.2 Univariate Description of Predictors and Criterion Variables.....	44
4.2.1 Internet and Traditional Mass Media Usage Patterns of the Respondents.....	44
4.2.1.1 Internet Usage.....	44
4.2.1.2 Traditional Mass Media Usage.....	45
4.2.2 Current and Future Climate of Opinion on PPSMI.....	48
4.2.3 Fear of Isolation.....	48
4.2.4 Own Opinion, Opinion Congruency, and Opinion Expression.....	50
4.3 Test of the Relationship of Own Opinion, Perceptions of Current and Future Climates of Opinions with Internet Use Variables and Mass Media Use Variables.....	51
4.4 Relationship of Opinion Expression with Internet Use, Media Use, Climates of Opinion, Opinion Congruencies, and Fear of Isolation.....	52
4.5 Test of Hypotheses.....	54
4.5.1 Relationship of Internet Use with Own Opinion, Opinion Climate, and Opinion Expression.....	54
4.5.1.1 Relationship between Internet Use and Own Opinion.....	55
4.5.1.2 Relationship between Internet Use and Opinion Climate.....	56
4.5.1.3 Relationship between Internet Use and Opinion Expression.....	57
4.5.2 Relationship of Traditional Media Use with Own Opinion, Opinion Climate, and Opinion Expression.....	59
4.5.2.1 Relationship between Traditional Media Use and Own Opinion.....	59
4.5.2.2 Relationship between Traditional Media Use and Opinion Climate Variables.....	60
4.5.2.3 Relationship between Traditional Media Use and Opinion Expression.....	61

4.5.3 Relationship between Media Use and Climate of Opinion with Internet Use as a Moderator Variable.....	62
4.5.4 Relationship between Opinion Climate and Opinion Expression .	64
4.5.5 Relationship between Fear of Isolation and Opinion Expression..	65
4.5.6 Relationship between Opinion Congruence and Opinion Expression with Fear of Isolation as Moderator Variable.....	65
4.6 Discussions of the Findings .....	66
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>72</b>
5.1 Overview of the Study .....	72
5.2 Conclusions .....	74
5.3 Recommendations for the Future Research .....	75
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>78</b>
APPENDIX I: QUESTIONNAIRE .....	86
APPENDIX II: CORRELATION MATRIX .....	90
APPENDIX III: LETTERS AND REQUESTS.....	91

## LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table No.</u>		<u>Page No.</u>
3.1	Distribution of demographic characteristics of respondents	39
3.2	Distribution of the mean, standard deviation and reliability coefficient of fear of isolation index	41
4.1	Time spent on the Internet in a week by service used	45
4.2	Frequency of weekly exposure to TV news & informational programs and weekly newspaper reading	46
4.3	Time spent with TV news and information programs, and time spent on newspaper reading	47
4.4	Mean and standard deviation of traditional mass media variables	47
4.5	Respondents perception of current and future climate of opinion on PPSMI	48
4.6	Respondents' fear of isolation on a 10-item index	49
4.7	Distribution of respondents' own opinion, current opinion congruency, future opinion congruency, and opinion expression	50
4.8	Correlation of respondents' own opinion, and perceptions of current and future climates of opinion with Internet use variables and mass media use variables	52
4.9	Correlation of respondents' opinion expression with Internet use, traditional media use, climates of opinion, opinion congruencies, and fear of isolation	53
4.10	Relationship of Internet use variables with own opinion	56
4.11	Correlation between Internet use variables and climate of opinion variables	57
4.12	Relationship of Internet use variables with opinion expression	58
4.13	Correlation of traditional media use variables with own opinion	60

4.14	Correlation of traditional media use variables with current and future climates of opinion	61
4.15	Correlation between traditional media use variables and opinion expression	62
4.16	Multiple regression of current climate of opinion on mass media use variables and their interaction with Internet use variables	63
4.17	Multiple regression of future climate of opinion on mass media use variables and their interaction with Internet use variables	64
4.18	Relationship of climate of opinion variables with opinion expression	65
4.19	Relationship between fear of isolation and opinion expression	65
4.20	Predicting willingness to express own opinion by opinion congruence variables and their interaction with fear of isolation	66
4.21	Correlation of climates of opinion and own opinion	70

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure No.</u>		<u>Page No.</u>
2.1	Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence	18
2.2	Relationship of traditional media use with opinion climate and opinion expression	23
2.3	Relationship of Internet use with opinion climate and opinion expression.	25
2.4	Theoretical model of the moderation role of Internet use in the relationship between mass media use, and climate of opinion	26
2.5	Theoretical model of the relationship between fear of isolation and opinion expression	27
2.6	Theoretical model of the moderation role of fear of isolation in the relationship between opinion congruence and opinion expression	28
2.7	Overall theoretical model of the relationships under the study	29

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

An individual's willingness to express opinions is conditioned, mainly, by his or her perception of the opinion climate, and such conditioning is reinforced by those media messages which are in consonant with individuals' perception of opinion climate. This situation is best described by the theory known as the Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Taking the above perspective into consideration, and considering the different nature of the newer mass medium, i.e., Internet, the main purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of Internet use on the assumptions of the Spiral of Silence Theory. Specifically, what is the relationship between Internet Use and Opinion Climate and Opinion Expression?

Additionally, the cross-cultural applicability of the Spiral of Silence Theory is examined through testing the basic assumptions of Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory in the Malaysian societal setting.

### **1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The role of public deliberation has long been a key element of democracy (Friedland, 2001). Most classical theorists and scholars share the fundamental notion that deliberation and reciprocal dialogues with different social actors expose citizens to diverse ideas and arguments and promote their understanding of multiple points of views. Also, constant exposure to reasoning and disputation engenders an expanded public sphere and better informed opinions (Ho & McLeod, 2008). This view of

public opinion conceptualizes public opinion as a rational process (Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006; Semetko, 2004). However, the idea of genuine public deliberation is often impeded by dysfunctional social-psychological processes including the potential coercion of the majority (de Tocqueville, 1969) and the ensuing reluctance of the minority members to speak out of fear of social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993). One of the most relevant social-psychological theories of public opinion formation is Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory. This theory views public opinion as evolving from a process of social control, rather than through an elite-centered rational process (Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

The Spiral of Silence Theory postulates that individuals, driven largely by a fear of social isolation, scrutinize their environment to evaluate the climate of opinion on an issue. The climate of opinion is the public's perception of how the opinions are distributed in a society on an issue. The public perception of climate of opinion results in public opinion formation through a process of opinion expression in the public. Individuals who perceive their opinions to be popular or gaining public support are more likely to express their views than those who believe their opinions are not shared by the majority or are losing ground. Over time, this public expression induces a spiralling process in which the group that perceives itself to be in majority becomes vocal in expressing its opinions, while the group that perceives itself as minority increasingly tends to mute its opinions. This establishes the opinion of the vocal group as a dominant majority opinion.

In this process, according to Noelle-Neumann, mass media play a decisive role. Mass media not only influence public perceptions about the climate of opinion on an issue but also influence a spiralling process by providing information, opinions, and arguments for or against positions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993). Noelle-Neumann

formulated Spiral of Silence Theory at a time when the Internet was not around. Although the Internet, today, has become a pervasive mass medium, the Spiral of Silence literature provides little evidence of studies that have examined Internet use as one of the variables in the Spiral of Silence Theory (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Khan, Delisyah, & Yusafzai, 2007; Ning, Guo, & Guo, 2008). The present study, therefore, incorporates a set of the Internet Use variables as predictors alongside with the usual Spiral of Silence predictors of opinion expression.

### **1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The Spiral of Silence Theory of public opinion formation is presented and discussed in the context of media theory, and it allocates considerable power to media in the process of public opinion formation. In particular, mass media tend to play a powerful role in public opinion formation in an environment of mass media consonants, when the tenor of coverage in important media happens to be consonant. This situation happens when the media is under the control of the government especially in a closed political system. All these notwithstanding, according to one meta-analysis, the role of mass media has been inadequately studied in the spiraling process of public opinion formation (Shanahan, Glynn, & Hayes, 2007).

Moreover the studies that have examined the effect of mass media use on the Spiral of Silence variables provide, at best, mixed evidence. The evidence varies and ranges from no effect, at all, of media exposure on opinion expression (Kim, Han, Shanahan, & Berdayes, 2004; Shoemaker, Breen, & Stamper, 2000), to the exposure effects of specific type of newspaper stories only (Scheufele, Shanahan, & Lee, 2001), to the effects of news magazines only (Willnat, 1996), to the effect of the overall exposure to newspapers and television (Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001).

Despite the extent of the ambiguity surrounding the effects of traditional media on opinion expression, the Spiral of Silence literature seems to have, surprisingly, missed out on examining the effects of Internet use on opinion expression in public. Given the unique nature of this relatively newer mass medium, the theoretical reasoning that might account for the relationship of Internet use with opinion expression ought to be different from the assumption of media tenor and consonance. Due to its element of low social presence or reduced meta-communication component in communication situations (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967), due to its potential for instant interconnectivity with virtually non-existent time and space constraints, and due to the relative anonymity that it affords to its users, the Internet may greatly facilitate user's outspokenness and opinion exchange (Gallupe, Bastianutti, & Cooper, 1991; Siegel, V, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986). An individual's engagement in opinion exchange through Internet if continued over a longer period of time may attenuate the dysfunctional impact of social-psychological factors on his opinion expression in public (Ho & McLeod, 2008). Such Internet services like chat rooms, forums and discussion groups, blogs, etc. provide a handy venue available to individuals for opinion expression and exchange. Frequent use of these fora for opinion expression and exchange may explain offline opinion expression in two ways: (i) by conditioning a general disposition of outspokenness among heavy users, and (ii) by providing people with a repertoire of arguments, as the Internet is a richer source of information than the traditional media (Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001; Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006; Schoenbach, 2006).

In addition, according to some critics, traditional channels of mass media, in the wake of the present ongoing wave of the "third communication revolution" (Stevenson, 1994) seems to have lost considerable audiences to Internet, and the

traditional media are sometimes thought to be progressively becoming de-massified (McQuail, 2005). However, most Spiral of Silence research considers only the tenor of the “mass” media, downplaying or ignoring the role of alternative media sources (Glynn & McLeod, 1985; Katz & Baldassare, 1992; Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001; Moy & Scheufele, 2000; Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo, 2007; Salmon & Neuwirth, 1987). This is most likely due to Noelle-Neumann’s (1985, 1989, 1993) emphasis on the effects of “trend-setting” or “influential” (mass) media (Clarke, 2006).

Considering the potential of the Internet to scuttle the traditional mass media’s hegemony over the perception of opinion climate in society, there may well be dual or multiple climates of opinion in society. Such a situation might challenge the assumptions of the Spiral of Silence Theory, such as the mass media’s ability to influence perceptions of opinion climate and also the public expression of opinions.

Finally, although the Spiral of Silence Theory has been mainly tested in various cultural contexts, including Britain (Turner & Sparrow, 1993, 1997), Canada (Glynn & Park, 1997), Germany (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1977, 1984, 2002), Mexico (Neuwirth, 2000), the USA (Scheufele, 1999), Japan (Ikeda, 1989; Tokinoya, 1989; 1996), Korea (Yang, 1997), Israel (Shamir, 1995, 1997), the Philippines (Gonzales, 1988), Singapore (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Willnat et al., 2002) and Slovenia (Petric & Pinter, 2002), the findings have been mixed. It is also argued ‘that the theory might be more relevant to less individualistic cultures, particularly those in Asia’ (Kim & Markman, 2004; Lee, Detenber, Willnat, Andy, & Graf, 2004; Scheufele & Moy, 2000) as there is a substantial difference in personality traits of people living in different cultures (Scheufele & Moy, 2000).

Test of the Spiral of Silence Theory in a collectivistic culture; i.e., culture in which individuals’ conduct is likely to be influenced more by others’ perceptions of

him/her, is likely to yield different results than one expected in individualistic cultures that stress the value of straight talk and where individuals tend to ‘verbalize overtly their individual wants and needs’ and ‘what other people think of them is of only marginal importance to them’. In collectivistic culture ‘the expression of self wills is situationally based and depends heavily on the social environment at the time the social interaction takes place’, as a result, collectivists are more conforming than individualists (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). Hence, testing the Spiral of Silence Theory in a Malaysian societal setting may shed further light on its cross-cultural relevance.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study explores the role of the Internet in the process of public opinion formation, specifically, what is the impact of Internet on perception of opinion climate and on opinion expression. Hence, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

**RQ1:** What are the patterns of respondents’ Internet usage, TV news and informational programs exposure, and newspaper reading?

**RQ2:** What are the respondents’ own opinion, and perception of current and future climates of opinion on using English as a medium for teaching Math and Science in schools in Malaysia (PPSMI)<sup>1</sup>?

**RQ3:** What are the respondents’ level of fear of isolation and level of opinion expression on using English as a medium for teaching Math and Science in schools in Malaysia (PPSMI)?

**RQ4:** What is the relationship of own opinion, and perceptions of climates of opinion with Internet use and mass media use?

---

<sup>1</sup> PPSMI is an abbreviation for “Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris” which is the Malay translation of “teaching Science and Mathematics in English”.

**RQ5:** What is the relationship of opinion expression with Internet use, media use, current and future climate of opinion, opinion congruency, and fear of isolation?

## **1.5 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study is to find out the direct and indirect impact of Internet use on opinion expression, and to test the basic hypotheses of Spiral of Silence Theory in a collective culture. This study specifically aims to fulfil these objectives:

**Objective 1:** To find out the respondents' Internet usage, TV news exposure, and newspaper reading pattern.

**Objective 2:** To find out the respondents' own opinion, and perceptions of current and future climates of opinion on using English as a medium for teaching Math and Science in schools in Malaysia (PPSMI).

**Objective 3:** To find out the respondents' level of fear of isolation as well as their level of opinion expression on using English as a medium for teaching Math and Science in schools in Malaysia (PPSMI).

**Objective 4:** To analyze the relationship of respondents' own opinion, and perceptions of current and future climates of opinion with Internet use variables as well as mass media use variables.

**Objective 5:** To analyze the relationship of opinion expression with various types of Internet use, types of media use, current and future climates of opinion, current and future opinion congruency, and fear of isolation.

## 1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Considering the Internet's impact potential on daily lives, its ability to change people's behaviour, diversity of its information content, and the high amount of time people spend using it, lack of attention to this construct in the Spiral of Silence literature is quite glaring. A couple of exceptions notwithstanding (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Shen, Ning, Guo, & Guo, 2008), the Spiral of Silence studies have generally not examined Internet use as a predictor of public opinion expression. In sum, the present study is significant for the following reasons:

- (i) By incorporating Internet use variable into the Spiral of Silence predictors the study will try to determine the relevance of the Spiral of Silence in the Internet age.
- (ii) By operationalizing it as time spent online, the previous studies that have inadequately examined Internet Use in the Spiral of Silence Theory (Khan, Delisyah, & Yusafzai, n.d.). Therefore, there is need to examine the role of Internet in the Spiral of Silence by operationalizing the construct Internet use multi-dimensionally.
- (iii) Additionally, testing the basic assumptions of Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory in a non-Western cultural setting of Malaysia may shed some light on cross-cultural applicability of the theory and its policy implications for public opinion formation in collectivist cultures.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

In addition to explaining the importance of opinion expression in the process of public opinion formation, this chapter provides description of the main concepts used in the study, namely, public opinion expression, Internet use, traditional media use, own opinion, perception of opinion climate, opinion congruence, and fear of isolation. It also discusses the theoretical framework of the study, which is the Spiral of Silence Theory, underpinning the research and review of previous studies on the Spiral of Silence hypotheses, and role of the Internet in public opinion expression. Finally, the chapter presents hypotheses of the study.

#### **2.2 PUBLIC OPINION AND OPINION EXPRESSION**

##### **2.2.1 Importance of Opinion Expression**

Public opinion, as a concept and as a process, has been considered a key factor in the outcome of political and social issues for centuries (Glynn & McLeod, 2001). However, even among the classical writers on public opinion, it is found that public opinion is a matter of speaking out and remaining silent (Noelle-Neumann E., 1974). Though, from Greek polis to the contemporary town hall meeting, scholars emphasize the role of deliberation among citizens as a key element of democracy (McLeod, et al., 1999), the public sphere is not always constituted by rational-critical discourse that enables the formation of public opinion through which official decision making can be held democratically. As Noelle-Neumann explained in her theory, the deliberation of

genuine ideas in public is obstructed by some social-psychological factors explained by the Spiral of Silence Theory. Therefore, there is a need to identify ways to overcome these normative social influences in order to encourage productive social interaction among citizens.

### **2.2.2 Role of the Internet in Opinion Expression**

Ever since the introduction of the Internet two decades ago, there has been an enthusiasm about the potential of this new technology as an effective forum for fostering deliberation, gathering information, and exchanging views and opinions among citizens (Hardy & Scheufele, 2004; Ho & McLeod, 2008).

In fact, some researchers have proposed that individuals may now interact and deliberate through computer-mediated channels, bypassing traditional face-to-face meetings (Ho & McLeod, 2008).

The appearance of Internet broke some taboos in the communication tradition. It was the first medium which allowed many-to-many model of communication, and as such promoted the receiver to the more prestigious rank of user of information. Audience was not any more only silent listener or reader, but gained the full rights to produce and circulate news, and to address the other part of mass audience. With the development of technologies more and more users were plugging their computers to Internet to get different and new information and opinions, to connect and to discuss this information with different people, to share some news that they have heard, or events that they have witnessed, or just to ask about advice or help. This process gave wider choice of information sources.

The above features of the Internet might free people from the psychological barriers that otherwise would cause them not to engage in deliberation. So, the