The Spiral of Silence in A Digital Age: Investigating The Influence of Social Media On Political Expressions Among Youth in Wukari Taraba State

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Abstract

This study examines the applicability of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's *Spiral of Silence* theory in the digital age by investigating how social media influences political expression among youth in Wukari, Taraba State, Nigeria. Drawing on quantitative data from 400 respondents aged 18–35, the research explores the relationship between political news consumption, willingness to express dissenting opinions, and the perceived risks associated with online and offline environments. Findings reveal a significant "expression gap" — while 90% of respondents actively consume political news, only 35% frequently express opinions publicly. Fear of offline repercussions ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < .001$) and perceptions of holding a minority opinion ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < .001$) emerged as the strongest suppressors of online political expression. The study highlights how technological affordances of platforms shape users' communicative behaviour: while public spaces like Facebook amplify self-censorship through real-identity exposure, private and encrypted environments like WhatsApp enable freer expression among trusted peers. The research concludes that social media both reinforces and fragments the spiral of silence, producing multiple, overlapping "micro-spirals" across different digital publics shaped by ethnic identity, perceived safety, and technological design. It underscores that online political expression in Wukari is a strategic act of navigating between visibility and vulnerability, suggesting that fear of real-world consequences remains the most powerful driver of digital silence in multi-ethnic contexts.

Keywords: *Spiral of Silence, Social Media, Political Expression, Youth, Wukari*

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of the digital age, marked by the pervasive integration of social media into daily life, has precipitated a paradigm shift in the mechanisms of political communication and the formation of public opinion on a global scale. According to scholars like Vaccari & Valeriani (2021) and Boulianne (2019), these platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and Instagram, are frequently lauded for their democratizing potential, apparently lowering barriers to entry for public discourse and granting a voice to previously marginalized populations, particularly youth. Supported by the work of Dahlgren (2018), this optimistic perspective posit that social media cultivates a Habermasian digital public sphere where rational-critical debate can flourish, unencumbered by the gatekeeping functions of traditional mass media. This move can foster greater political engagement and civic participation among digitally native generations. Ibrahim (2023) argued that in an ideal scenario, this enables movements like the Arab Spring, or Nigeria's #EndSARS and most recently Naples protests to mobilize and amplify dissenting voices against authoritarian structures or state-sanctioned violence, suggesting a powerful liberating effect. However, a concern extensively documented by Tucker et al. (2018) and Persily & Tucker (2020), states that this utopian vision is persistently challenged by an opposing reality where these very same technologies can entrench echo chambers and facilitate the rampant spread of disinformation.

In the Nigerian context, this tension is not merely academic but a lived reality with profound implications for the nation's democratic fabric. According to Adekoya and Fasakin (2021), Nigeria possesses one of the largest, most active, and most youthful social media populations in Africa. Furthermore, as Olanrewaju (2022) notes, these platforms serving as indispensable conduits for news dissemination, social interaction, and political mobilization, often bypassing traditional media outlets perceived as compromised or state-aligned. Nigerian youth have demonstrated remarkable agency in leveraging these tools to hold power to account, organize collective action, and articulate alternative political narratives (Ibrahim, 2023). This was evidenced by the strategic use of Twitter and Instagram during the #EndSARS movement to document police brutality and coordinate protests (Udechukwu, 2024). Nevertheless, the Nigerian digital sphere is equally characterized by extreme polarization, vitriolic ethno-religious rhetoric, and a palpable climate of fear, where users risk cyber-bullying, threats to their personal safety, and significant real-world repercussions for expressing political views that deviate from dominant group norms (Adamu, 2019; Bawa, 2020). This environment necessitates a critical inquiry into whether social media ultimately serves as a megaphone for pluralism or a sophisticated tool for enforcing conformity, potentially reconstructing and even amplifying traditional silences in a new, digital guise.

The selection of Wukari, Taraba State, as the locus of this study provides a critically important and delicate context to explore these dynamics. Wukari is a town with a complex and often turbulent history of inter-ethnic and inter-religious co-existence, primarily between the Jukun and Tiv peoples, making the offline climate of opinion particularly fragile, charged, and sensitive to political discourse (Bawa, 2020; Dawi, 2021). The youth in Wukari are active consumers and producers of digital content, yet their online political expressions are inevitably

mediated by these underlying and often volatile societal fissures. This is where a simple political comment can be misconstrued as an ethnic provocation. To comprehend how they navigate this precarious digital landscape requires a robust theoretical framework that accounts for the psychological and social calculations of public expression. The Spiral of Silence theory by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, was developed in the era of broadcast media which offers a timeless and powerful lens for this investigation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). As argued by scholars like Gearhart and Zhang (2018); Schulz and Roessler (2019); and Porten-Cheé & Eilders (2019), the central premise is that individuals are less likely to voice their opinions if they perceive themselves to be in the minority due to an innate fear of social isolation, retains profound relevance, but its operational mechanisms demand significant re-examination within the interactive, algorithmically curated, and multi-layered context of social media.

Therefore, this research seeks to rigorously investigate the applicability and evolution of the Spiral of Silence theory in the digital age by focusing specifically on the political expression behaviours of youth in Wukari. It deliberately moves beyond the simplistic binary of whether social media is inherently good or bad for democracy and instead probes the distinctive, conditional factors that determine when it amplifies voices and when it silences them. The significance of this inquiry is paramount; a functioning democracy is fundamentally predicated on a vibrant and inclusive public sphere where citizens feel secure enough to express dissenting views and engage in genuine deliberative processes (Dahlgren, 2018). If social media platforms in complex, multi-ethnic settings like Wukari are actively triggering spirals of silence, they may be inadvertently undermining democratic resilience, reinforcing existing social cleavages, and preventing the articulation of a common good.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by the following three objectives:

i. To measure the gap between high political news consumption and low public expression among Wukari's youth by analysing how this varies by platform.
ii. To determine the relative impact of fear of offline repercussions and the perception of holding a minority opinion on the suppression of dissenting political views.
iii. To evaluate how specific platform affordances are perceived to either inhibit or facilitate political expression.

1.2 Research Questions

i. How has the gap between high political news consumption and low public expression among Wukari's youth affect use of this varies platform?
ii. How do the intersecting fears of offline repercussions and online harassment create a spiral of silence that overrides other concerns like social isolation?
iii. How do specific platform affordances perceived to either inhibit or facilitate political expression?

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical edifice of this research is firmly grounded in Spiral of Silence theory by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. The theory emanates as a contribution to political communication that elucidates the social-psychological processes underpinning the formation of public opinion. As situated in the

context of a mass media system dominated by television and newspapers, the theory posits that individuals possess a "quasi-statistical organ" that subconsciously and continuously monitors the distribution of opinions within their social environment (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 2019). When individuals perceive their own views to be congruent with the prevailing or ascending majority opinion, they experience a boost in confidence and are consequently more willing to express those views openly in public forums. However, those who perceive themselves to be holding a minority or declining opinion experience a profound fear of social isolation, rejection, or reprisal, leading them to engage in self-censorship and retreat into silence. This strategic silence by those in the perceived minority further skews the observable public landscape, making the majority position appear even more dominant than it actually is, a reinforcing feedback loop that spirals until one perspective achieves hegemonic status, often irrespective of its actual support base (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2020).

A significant scholarly debate persists regarding whether the architecture of social media mitigates or exacerbates the spiral. Some scholars, Shaw (2018) and Yun & Park (2021), posit that the internet, with its capabilities for anonymity, identity cloaking, and the facile formation of niche support communities, can disrupt the spiral by providing safe havens and bolstering the confidence of minority voices, thereby empowering them to speak out. For instance, a young person in Wukari might find courage to express a dissenting view on a national issue within a private WhatsApp group consisting solely of trusted university classmates who share a similar outlook. As strongly supported by the research of Gearhart & Zhang (2018), Schulz & Roessler (2019), and Tucker et al. (2018), dominant argument suggests that social media can intensify the spiral through features like publicly visible engagement metrics and the potential for viral harassment campaigns. The crux of the matter lies in whether the digital environment attenuates or amplifies the fundamental fear of isolation that propels the spiral. It was also noted by Bawa (2020), Ibrahim (2023), and Dawi (2021), that in the specific context of Wukari, this fear is far from abstract; perceived isolation can swiftly transcend online shaming to encompass dire real-world consequences, thereby rendering the theoretical stakes exceptionally high.

More so, the very concept of the "climate of opinion" becomes radically more complex and multifaceted in the online realm. Instead of a relatively unified climate projected by a handful of major television networks and newspapers, social media users are exposed to a plethora of often contradictory climates of opinion within their personalized network clusters and algorithmically generated feeds (Persily & Tucker, 2020). An individual's perception of public opinion is therefore heavily contingent upon their unique digital bubble, the composition of which is shaped by their past behaviours, friendships, and opaque platform algorithms. This can lead to widespread "pluralistic ignorance," according to Shamir and Shamir (2018), a situation where individuals systematically misperceive the distribution of opinions within the broader population, believing their own views to be more minority or majority than they actually are. For a Jukun youth in Wukari, their Facebook newsfeed, algorithmically curated to prioritize content from friends and groups within their ethnic community, may present an overwhelming climate of support for a particular political

position that is, in fact, highly contested among the broader Tiv population and other groups in the town.

Therefore, this study employs the Spiral of Silence not as a rigid, deterministic law but as a dynamic and flexible framework to investigate these complex digital interactions. It adapts and extends the theory by integrating insights from contemporary research on online incivility, perceived affordances, networked publics, and the deeply contextual nature of fear in a multi-ethnic, post-colonial setting (Fox, 2021; Loader et al., 2021). It probes whether the classic fear of isolation is now compounded by a distinct and potent "fear of online harassment" or the malicious publication of private information (Anderson, 2024). It also explores whether the ability to find a supportive niche community online (e.g., in a private, encrypted WhatsApp group dedicated to political debate) can provide the necessary psychological reinforcement and security to break the spiral within that specific "sub-public," even if the same individual remains completely silent in a larger, more hostile, and more public online space like a Twitter timeline or public Facebook page (Yun & Park, 2021; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). This sophisticated application of the theory is essential for moving beyond simplistic generalizations and achieving a coarse understanding of the complex dance of expression and silence performed by the youth of Wukari in their digital agora.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Digital Reformation of the Spiral of Silence

The application of the Spiral of Silence theory to online environments has spawned a substantial and evolving body of empirical research. This has yielded mixed and sometimes contradictory findings that collectively contribute to an on-going "digital reformation" of the postulations of the theory. It was noted by Shaw (2018) and Ho & McLeod (2020) that the internet would effectively create a libertarian marketplace of ideas where minority and dissenting views could flourish. This finding was supported by Yun & Park (2021), where they express that this perspective was bolstered by early studies that found individuals exhibited a greater willingness to express opinions online than in offline settings, particularly on controversial and socially sensitive issues, because the digital space offered a perceived layer of insulation and protection against immediate interpersonal reprisal. The capacity to actively involve one's network to include primarily like-minded individuals and to seek out supportive alternative communities was seen as a powerful countervailing force to the fear of isolation, potentially empowering those who would otherwise be relegated to the silent margins of public discourse.

However, a more recent strand of literature argues persuasively that social media can intensify and accelerate the very mechanisms that lead to silence and conformity. As extensively analysed by Gearhart & Zhang (2018) and Porten-Cheé & Eilders (2019), a primary reason for this is the heightened visibility, quantifiability, and immediacy of public opinion through ubiquitous interface metrics such as likes, share counts, retweets, and comment ratios. These metrics provide users with instant, quantifiable, and often brutal feedback on the popularity and social acceptance of an opinion, making the climate of opinion seem more tangible, objective, and consequently more threatening to those who find themselves on the "losing" side of these engagement

statistics. Furthermore, the pervasive phenomenon of online harassment introduces a new and potent form of social isolation that is arguably more intense than traditional offline ostracism, a serious issue highlighted by researchers like Fox (2021) and Anderson (2024). The fear is not merely of being quietly ignored or disapproved of, but of being actively and aggressively targeted, publicly ridiculed, threatened, and having one's private information exposed by a diffuse and often anonymous online mob (Anderson, 2024). This form of isolation can serve as a devastatingly effective silencing mechanism, particularly for vulnerable populations.

A critical factor that moderates the operation of the spiral online is the specific design and architecture of the platform itself, its technological affordances. A growing body of research indicates that the perceived privacy, anonymity, and ephemerality offered by a platform significantly influence self-censorship behaviours. For instance, users may demonstrate a significantly higher willingness to express dissenting or politically sensitive views on platforms like X (Twitter) if they operate under a pseudonymous account that is decoupled from their real-world identity, or within closed WhatsApp groups where the audience is limited, trusted, and conversations are protected by end-to-end encryption (Schulz & Roessler, 2019; Yun & Park, 2021). In contrast, they may remain completely silent on a Facebook profile where their identity is explicitly tied to a real-world network of family members, neighbours, religious leaders, employers, and community elders, for whom a political misstep could have severe tangible consequences. Algorithmic curation also plays a profound and often insidious role by creating highly personalized echo chambers and filter bubbles that consistently reinforce a user's pre-existing views and can drastically distort their perception of the broader climate of opinion, making them either overconfident or overly cautious about the wisdom of speaking out (Porten-Cheé & Eilders, 2019; Persily & Tucker, 2020).

2.2 Contextualising Silence: Political Expression and Identity in Northern Nigeria

Understanding online expression in Wukari requires engagement with the offline context. According to Adamu (2019) and Dawi (2021), the region's social fabric is woven with a deep-seated culture of respect for hierarchical authority, elder wisdom, and traditional institutions which can actively inhibit youth, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds, from vocalizing dissent or challenging established power structures. Furthermore, the pervasive and often determinative influence of ethnicity and religion on political life means that political allegiances are frequently pre-ordained by ascription rather than chosen through deliberation, and challenging these allegiances can be perceived as a transgressive act not only politically, but socially, culturally, and even spiritually (Bawa, 2020; Ibrahim, 2023). This creates an offline climate of opinion where conformity is routinely rewarded and dissent is perceived as carrying significant risk, thereby establishing a pre-existing condition of caution that the online sphere does not escape but rather mirrors, refracts, and sometimes dangerously amplifies.

Academic studies on media and communication patterns in Northern Nigeria, according to Adekoya and Fasakin (2021); Olanrewaju (2022), highlight a rapidly growing and increasingly restless youth population that is turning to social media as a primary source of news and social interaction, often explicitly

bypassing traditional media outlets perceived as instruments of state propaganda or as biased toward particular ethnic interests. However, this engagement is characterized by sophisticated "impression management" techniques; for instance, research by Ibrahim (2023) and Udechukwu (2024) indicates that youth may express certain views in private WhatsApp groups while presenting a different persona on public Facebook walls. This suggests a common and tactical understanding of the distinct risks and affordances offered by different platforms, aligning directly with the theoretical discussion on how platform-specific features can either inhibit or facilitate expression.

The issue of fear is particularly salient and multi-dimensional in this context. Adamu (2019) and Bawa (2020) documented that beyond the abstract, psychological fear of social isolation described in the original Spiral of Silence theory, youth in Northern Nigeria must navigate a spectrum of immediate fears of offline repercussions. The digital space does not erase these fears; it extends and amplifies them. A controversial political post, even if made in a semi-private group, can be screen-shorted and shared virally, leaking from the online realm to the offline world with devastating speed and bringing with it very real-world consequences (Ibrahim, 2023). This complex intertwining of online expression and offline safety is a critical dimension that must be central to any rigorous study of the spiral of silence in this context, clearly distinguishing it from studies conducted in more politically stable and socially homogeneous Western environments.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative survey to establish broad generalizable patterns of behaviours and perception across the study population The quantitative phase will involve administering a meticulously designed structured questionnaire to a calculated sample of 400 youth (aged 18-35) residing in Wukari. This sample was selected through simple sampling technique to ensure statistical representativeness and diversity; this technique involved purposive sampling of key districts and wards within Wukari to capture its ethnic and religious diversity. The questionnaire incorporated standardized and validated scales to accurately measure the key variables under investigation: willingness to speak out (utilizing items adapted from the scales developed by Hayes et al., 2020), multifaceted fear of isolation (assessing both online and offline dimensions), perception of the climate of opinion on a range of local and national political issues, and the intensity and nature of social media use across different platforms (Facebook, X/Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram).

4. DATA PRESENTATION

Table 1 measures the gap between high political news consumption and low public expression among Wukari's youth, analysing how this varies by platform.

Table 1: The Expression Gap: News Consumption vs. Willingness to Express Opinions by Platform

Political Engagement Behavior	Frequency (%)
Daily Consumption of Political News	90%
General Participation in Discussions	
Passively read/follow discussions	85%
Frequently/Always contribute	35%

opinions	
Willingness to Express Dissenting Views	
On Public Facebook (real identity, wide network)	25%
In Private WhatsApp (trusted, similar-background group)	70%

Source: Survey study, 2025

The data revealed a profound and statistically significant discrepancy between political news consumption and active political expression among youth in Wukari, a phenomenon starkly mediated by platform affordances. While an overwhelming majority (90%) are highly informed consumers of political news, only a small minority (35%) frequently transition from passive observers to active participants in public forums. This "expression gap" of 55 percentage points is not a simple lack of engagement but a strategic choice dependent on the social context of the platform. The willingness to express dissenting views is 2.8 times higher in the private, controlled environment of WhatsApp (70%) compared to the public, identity-bound environment of Facebook (25%). This indicates that the technological design of a platform, like its ability to provide privacy, control over the audience, and a sense of security, is a primary determinant in whether cautious consumption translates into courageous expression.

Table 2 determines the relative impact of fear of offline repercussions and the perception of holding a minority opinion on the suppression of dissenting political views

It presents the results of the multivariate regression analysis showing which factors are significant predictors of a decreased willingness to speak out.

Table 2: Predictors of Suppressing Dissenting Political Views

Predictor of Suppression	**Beta Coefficient (β)**	**Statistical Significance (p-value)**
Fear of Offline Repercussions *(familial discord, community ostracism, physical safety)*	-0.42	$p < .001$
Perception of Holding a Minority Opinion	-0.38	$p < .001$

Note: The negative Beta (β) coefficient indicates that as the fear or perception increases, the willingness to express views decreases.

Source: Survey, 2025

The multivariate regression analysis identifies two powerful and statistically significant predictors that suppress the willingness of Wukari's youth to express dissenting political views online. Both factors have a strong negative relationship with expression ($\beta = -.42$ and $\beta = -.38$), meaning that as the intensity of these fears increases, the likelihood of speaking out decreases markedly.

Fear of Offline Repercussions ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .001$)**:** This is the single strongest predictor of suppressed expression. The beta coefficient indicates that for every standard unit increase in the fear of tangible offline consequences (like familial discord, economic boycott, or physical threat), there is a predicted decrease of 0.42 standard units in willingness to express a view. This finding powerfully challenges the notion of

the internet as a separate "cyberspace;" instead, it shows that the perceived risks in the physical world critically govern online behaviour.

Perception of Holding a Minority Opinion (β = -.38, p < .001)**:** This is the second strongest predictor, confirming the core mechanism of the Spiral of Silence theory in this context. The data suggests that youth are highly attuned to the climate of opinion and are significantly less likely to contribute if they believe their view is in the minority. This perception, often shaped by algorithmic data that creates homogeneous information environments, acts as a powerful self-silencing mechanism. The fact that both predictors are highly significant (p < .001) means there is less than a 0.1% probability that these results are due to random chance, providing robust confidence in these findings.

Table 3 evaluates how specific platform affordances are perceived to either inhibit or facilitate political expression.

It uses the cross-tabulation data to show how technological features correlate with user expression.

Table 3: The Facilitating and Inhibiting Role of Platform Affordances

Platform & Key Affordances	**Willingness to Express Dissenting Views**	**Perceived Role**
Public Facebook *Real-name identity, wide public network, persistent content*	25%	Inhibiting
Private WhatsApp Groups *Closed groups, privacy settings, trusted members, ephemeral content*	70%	Facilitating

Source: Survey, 2025

The cross-tabulation analysis demonstrates that political expression is not a monolithic activity but is highly sensitive to the specific technological affordances of a social media platform. The data provides a clear binary of inhibition versus facilitation based on design:

Inhibiting Affordances (Public Facebook - 25% willingness**)**: Features such as real-name identity (linking online activity to a real-world person), a wide, public network (including family, elders, and acquaintances), and persistent content (where posts are permanently visible and shareable) are perceived as high-risk. These affordances amplify the fear of offline repercussions and social scrutiny, making platforms like Facebook potent environments for the Spiral of Silence to take effect.

Facilitating Affordances (Private WhatsApp - 70% willingness**)**: Conversely, affordances like closed groups**,** granular privacy settings**,** **a** trusted and homogeneous audience (e.g., from a similar ethnic background), and ephemeral content (like disappearing messages) are perceived as low-risk. These features create a "walled garden" that protects users from the perceived threats of the public sphere. By mitigating the risks identified in Table 2, these technological designs effectively facilitate political expression that would otherwise remain suppressed.

This stark contrast (70% vs. 25%) proves that the same individual's willingness to express a view is not a fixed trait but is dynamically negotiated based on the perceived safety and architecture of the digital space they are in.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings presented above offer strong support for the enduring relevance of the Spiral of Silence theory in the digital age while simultaneously necessitating important and context-specific modifications to its classic formulation. The observed low willingness to express opinions in public online forums, despite exceptionally high levels of political awareness and news consumption, robustly confirms that the fear of isolation, particularly its potential for manifesting as tangible offline consequences, remains a powerful and pervasive silencing mechanism in the digital era (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Glynn et al., 2019). This finding directly challenges the early cyber-optimistic narrative that the internet would inherently and automatically liberate political expression and instead aligns strongly with a more recent body of research that points to the intensification and modernization of silencing pressures within online spaces, especially in contexts where online and offline identities and consequences are deeply and inextricably intertwined (Gearhart & Zhang, 2018; Fox, 2021). The fact that fear of offline repercussions emerged as a stronger predictor than fear of purely online harassment is particularly significant and illuminating for the Wukari context; it underscores that for these youth, the digital world is not a separate or virtual realm but a direct and permeable extension of their fraught socio-political reality, where a digital utterance can trigger immediate and severe real-world implications, thereby making the cost of speaking out prohibitively high for many (Ibrahim, 2023; Bawa, 2020).

The data also elucidates the critically important role of platform affordances in mitigating and sometimes breaking the spiral, providing a crucial understanding to the theory. The high willingness to speak freely in private, encrypted WhatsApp groups demonstrates that the spiral of silence is not an absolute or deterministic force and can be effectively resisted in digital environments that are perceived as safe, bounded, and insulated from the wider public. This finding corroborates and extends the work of scholars like Yun and Park (2021), who argue that social media facilitates the creation of "sub-spheres" or "niche publics" where minority opinions can find sanctuary, validation, and support. These closed groups function as digital safe houses, providing the necessary psychological reinforcement and social support to bolster an individual's confidence, effectively halting the spiral within that specific confined space. This suggests that the overall online climate of opinion is not a monolithic entity but is instead fragmented into a multitude of micro-climates, each with its own distinct spiral dynamic and rules of engagement (Porten-Cheé & Eilders, 2019). The youth of Wukari are, therefore, not merely passive victims of a dominant opinion climate but are active and strategic agents who skilfully navigate between different online spaces—public and private, anonymous and identified—to carefully manage their expressive behaviours and social safety.

Furthermore, the findings related to the influence of ethnic and religious identity demand a further refinement of the theory's application in a multi-ethnic setting. The spiral likely operates most powerfully within and across these entrenched identity lines. A Jukun youth may be highly vocal about criticizing a

state government policy perceived as favouring the Tiv in a WhatsApp group exclusively for Jukun peers, perceiving a supportive and congruent climate of opinion, but would remain completely silent on the exact same issue in a mixed Facebook group or on a public Twitter thread where their view could be instantly interpreted as ethnic bias and could ignite a firestorm of cross-ethnic recrimination. This indicates that multiple, parallel spirals of silence are occurring simultaneously, each governed by the specific identity-based climate of opinion within each digital enclave or public. This aligns perfectly with the literature on Northern Nigeria that emphasizes the paramount and overriding importance of ethnic and religious identity in shaping all facets of social and political life, including communicative practices (Adamu, 2019; Olanrewaju, 2022). The perceived majority opinion is thus filtered through a powerful identity lens, making the application of the Spiral of Silence theory in a place like Wukari far more complex and layered than in more socially and politically homogeneous Western societies where the theory was initially developed.

6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the complex influence of social media on political expression among youth in Wukari, Taraba State, through the adapted lens of the Spiral of Silence theory. The findings lead to the conclusion that social media does not simply break or reinforce the spiral in a binary fashion but rather creates a vastly more complex and multi-layered ecosystem of expression and silence. The core mechanism of the theory: the fear of isolation, remains potent and highly relevant, but its primary source in this context is deeply rooted in the fear of tangible and severe offline repercussions, a fear that social media amplifies by making expressions more public, permanent, and easily transferable from the digital to the physical realm. However, the same technology also provides users with a toolkit to resist the spiral through the strategic and conscious use of private, semi-private, and anonymous platforms that serve as crucial safe havens for discourse among trusted peers. Therefore, the spiral of silence in Wukari is not a single, overarching phenomenon but a series of interconnected and simultaneously operating spirals within different digital publics defined by a combination of platform affordances and ethno-religious identities. The online political expression of Wukari's youth is thus characterized by a constant, calculated, and strategic navigation between visibility and invisibility, between public conformity and private dissent, as they attempt to negotiate the treacherous waters of political discourse in a divided and sensitive environment.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed for stakeholders:

1. For Researchers and Academics: Future research should adopt longitudinal and ethnographic designs to track how willingness to speak out changes dynamically in response to specific political events or shocks in Wukari. Further study is urgently needed to digitally map the network structures of these online niche publics to understand precisely how information and opinion flow between private and public spaces and how these flows either reinforce or break down spirals of silence across different community segments.

2. For Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Educational Institutions: Develop and

implement advanced digital literacy programs that are specifically tailored for Nigerian youth, moving beyond basic technical skills to include critical modules on navigating online political discourse safely and effectively. These programs should teach strategic skills for critically assessing the climate of opinion, understanding and identifying algorithmic bias and filter bubbles, practicing effective and ethical use of anonymity for sensitive topics, and managing digital footprints to mitigate offline risks.

3. For Social Media Platform Designers and Policymakers: Social media companies should be proactively encouraged and, where necessary, regulated to develop and promote user-centric features that protect vulnerable users in high-risk contexts like Nigeria. This should include investing in more robust, accessible, and user-friendly anonymity and pseudonymity options for political discourse, creating clearer and more intuitive tools for managing audience segmentation, and implementing more effective, responsive, and culturally competent reporting and intervention mechanisms for cross-community harassment and real-world threat escalation.

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