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Online Political Discourse in Cambodia: Does Facebook Serve as a Public Sphere or the Spiral of Silence?

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Abstract

With the emergence of web-as-participation platforms, social media such as Facebook allows users to discuss public opinion for political and social changes in both small groups and the public sphere. To understand whether Facebook is a free without-fear public sphere, this study aimed to investigate the attitudes and behaviours of Facebook users toward political opinion expression on the political Facebook platform called Politikoffee. To address this research gap, this study focused on Cambodian Politikoffee participants aged between 18 and 33, who are considered active tech-savvy and public activists. The data were collected through digital ethnography on the Politikoffee Facebook platforms and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 8 respondents. To gain comprehensive insights into the attitudes and behaviours of Facebook users toward political opinion expression, the results were analysed in conjunction with the 'Spiral of Silence Theory'. The spiral of silence theory suggests that users tend to express their genuine ideas when they feel the majority supports their opinion. In contrast, they might remain silent if they realise only a small social group upholds their idea because they fear social isolation. In examining whether Facebook serves as a free and fear-free public sphere, the study discovered that Facebook users were concerned about online political discourse due to socio-psychological factors, including 1) the restriction of freedom of expression, 2) the fear of political arrest, 3) the prevalence of political nepotism, 4) worries about digital surveillance, 5) concerns about digital footprint, 6) political knowledge deficiency, and 7) the traumatising effects of civil war, which can trigger their self-censorship.

Keywords: Political Opinion Expression, Online Political Participation, Political Self-Disclosure, Social Media, The Spiral of Silence

1. Introduction

In the digital era, social media is seemingly considered a public sphere, allowing citizens to access news, join like-minded groups widely, and enhance a democratising mechanism for users to openly converse with politicians (Young, 2021). Habermas (1989) asserts that a public sphere is where individuals can gather to discuss public opinion for political changes. As of 2023, Cambodia has 10.45 million active Facebook users (Datareportal, 2023), making it an influential platform for citizens to distribute and receive information. Similarly, Cambodian citizens have consumed Facebook not only for entertainment but also to access daily

information and express their opinions (Chunly, 2019; Vorn & Ly, 2020). The focus of this study was to explore the complexities of social media for political knowledge dissemination in Cambodia by analysing the case of the Cambodian political Facebook platforms. As of September 2023, a Facebook platform in Cambodia called the 'Politikoffee' is considered a politically like-minded civic discourse platform. With 2,571 members on the Politikoffee Facebook group, and 14K Likes and 14K Followers on the Politikoffee Facebook Page, members actively debate and discuss the status quo of socio-political and economic issues on its Facebook group, Facebook page and weekly in-person forums. During the 2018 national election in Cambodia, when all independent media agencies were shut down, individuals turned to Facebook to fulfil their needs and satisfaction in engaging in political discussion, which users could broadcast, disseminate and debate (Chunly, 2019); and criticise the government (Association for Progressive Communications, 2017).

However, a significant research gap persists in Cambodia regarding Facebook as a public sphere for online political discourse as political opinion expression has yet to be thoroughly examined. Therefore, to the best of our knowledge, this study aims to explore the users' motives for their attitudes and behaviours in utilising the Facebook group for civic discourse. Additionally, it investigates whether Facebook is a free public sphere without fear, where users can express their opinions about sensitive political issues in Cambodia.

This study aims to determine whether the Facebook group serves as an effective digital technology transformation tool for users to express sensitive issues and gain more knowledge about politics in Cambodia. In addition, it provides deeper insights into examining the socio-psychological factors and social climate that influence individuals to express or suppress their political opinions on Facebook. The study makes a significant contribution to the field of media and communication, benefiting policymakers and academics by aiding in the understanding of the potential issues within Cambodia's digital media landscape.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, the study primarily demonstrates the most recent discourse on three main aspects of literature: digital surveillance and political self-disclosure, the digital media sphere in Cambodia, and the theoretical framework of the spiral of silence. To deeply dive into Facebook users' reasons for political opinion expression and oppression, the literature review also discusses the spiral of silence theory in conjunction with critical concepts, including fear of isolation, cognitive dissonance, knowledge deficiency, and corrective action.

2.1. Digital Surveillance and Political Self-disclosure

Several scholars have expressed different views on whether social media serves as a public sphere for individuals to engage in political and free communicative actions. Kruse et al. (2018) found that digital surveillance by government, peers and colleagues could alter users' behaviour on social media, leading to the oppression of opinions. In contrast, Diamond (2010) contends that digital technology has expanded the free flow of political, social, and economic discussions, instantly disseminating them to mass audiences. Morris and Morris (2013) argue that the emergence of the internet has energised 'citizen-based democracy', allowing individuals or groups to express their political opinions—a sign of democratic hope. For example, during the National Assembly election in 2013 in Cambodia, digital media facilitated the anti-government demonstrations when the opposition party claimed electoral fraud. These protests, mainly initiated through online networking, led to intense demonstrations and several deaths (Association for Progressive Communications, 2017). Political self-disclosure in Cambodia has triggered safety and security concerns. As of 2020, numerous opposition activists were imprisoned, and nearly 100 party members and civil society representatives faced court proceedings (Freedom House, 2021). In summary, while social media platforms provide more public space for citizens to exercise their civic rights and empower democracy, digital surveillance appears to deter individuals from disclosing their political standpoints, as online opinions can be continuously and unconsciously tracked and monitored.

2.2. *The Digital Media Landscape in Cambodia*

In Cambodia's digital media landscape, online freedom is considered partially free with some internet users facing arrest for online activities (Freedom House, 2022; Young, 2021). The country is often described as a semi-authoritarian state where political participation is still regulated (Chunly, 2019). Interestingly, Doyle (2021) asserts that social media has broadened the space for citizens to express their public concerns, especially in the absence of independent media outlets.

Political discussions on Facebook are noted to have a positive impact on the government's decisions and behavioural changes (Vong & Hok, 2018). For instance, in 2016, Prime Minister Hun Sen amended Cambodia's road traffic law following an outbreak of youth critique (Doyle, 2021). Eng and Hughes (2017) highlight that young people in Cambodia have played a pivotal role in the 2013 national election and political engagement, and online users actively participated in discussions on political content, covering elections, land concessions, factory worker protests, corruption, and issues related to natural resources. Din (2020) confirms that socioeconomic development significantly contributes to young people's knowledge in higher education, media literacy, technology usage and social construction. These factors empower the youth to become more sophisticated and active in political discussion compared to the older generations.

2.3. *Spiral of Silence Theory*

In the 'Spiral of Silence theory', individuals are more likely to express their genuine ideas when they believe the majority endorses their opinion. However, they tend to remain silent if they realise only a small social group supports their idea because they fear social isolation (Liu et al., 2017). Noelle-Neumann (1974) affirms that individuals choose to stay silent and conform to the majority, even when they disagree with prevailing ideas due to the fear of making a mistake, being alone and lacking confidence in their decision-making abilities. Therefore, concerns about self-presentation could discourage individuals from disclosing their political opinions, influenced by continuous digital surveillance and various social environments on Facebook (Liu et al., 2017).

To examine the spiral of silence theory, several scholars strive to explore various socio-psychological factors that shed light on why people remain silent and the influential factors in their social climate that can trigger them to suppress or express their opinions in public. In social psychology, Geiger and Swim (2016) argue that individuals are unwilling to express their opinions due to a lack of knowledge about a particular topic. Additionally, people may conceal their genuine opinions because they are influenced by psychological characteristics such as 'social inhibition, shyness, or fear of embarrassment' (Miller & McFarland, 1987, p. 299); 'fear of ostracism or ridicule' (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 1). In such circumstances, people's perceptions can be manipulated by pluralistic ignorance, fear of embarrassment, and digital surveillance, resulting in 'cognitive dissonance'. Kopp et al. (2019) assert that the concept of cognitive dissonance referred to as 'psychological discomfort', arises when people's behaviours are inconsistent with their beliefs and values. Individuals may try to suppress opposing thoughts with their friends to maintain harmony and friendships on social media (Duncan et al., 2020).

In contrast, some people are more likely to confront heterogeneous opinions, aligning with the concept of corrective action. Duncan et al. (2020) confirm that corrective action refers to individuals with firm ideas unlikely to change their standpoint. They will vigorously continue expressing their opinion even if endorsed by the minority. In this sense, individuals could have ambivalent attitudes and willingness to express or suppress their ideas in public, influenced by various socio-psychological phenomena, including the fear of isolation, digital surveillance, and knowledge deficiency, which can result in a spiral of silence. However, if a person's perception is strongly inclined by corrective action, they will be less likely to be influenced by the spiral of silence.

3. **Research Methodology and Approach**

This research study employed an empirical approach, aiming to shed light on the attitudes and behaviours of Facebook users. The objective was to examine whether Facebook serves as a free and fearless public sphere for users to express their opinions on social and political issues. The study was designed to comprehend and observe respondents' perceptions and reactions through the descriptive analysis of the in-depth semi-structured interviews, aiming to explore respondents' answers in greater detail.

3.1. Research Approach

Data was collected through qualitative methods, specifically digital ethnography and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Digital ethnography involved the analysis of all content posted on the Politikoffee Facebook page and the Facebook group from January 1, 2023, to September 30, 2023, encompassing the content before and during the election in Cambodia. In the social phenomenon of digital communications, digital ethnography enabled the researcher to observe and collect details about how digital media users interact, communicate, and behave on the platform. This analysis included online users' comments, visuals, audio files and reactions (Masten & Plowman, 2003; Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2016). Furthermore, digital ethnography allowed the researcher to understand the most favoured topics and the extent of political opinion expression or suppression among youths on the Politikoffee Facebook.

The semi-structured interview was conducted with 8 Politikoffee participants who regularly use Facebook to share their perspectives on Cambodia's political issues and participate in the Politikoffee Facebook platform. The purpose of the semi-structured interview was to explore respondents' attitudes, behaviour, and reactions toward political opinion expression on Facebook. The questions centred on the key issues related to public opinion expression on Facebook, the level of concern regarding political discussion and the role of Facebook as a public sphere.

3.2. Research Instrument

In-depth semi-structured interview questions were divided into three main parts, comprising with 17 questions. The first part aimed to understand respondents' Facebook usage, while the second part focused on their attitudes and behaviour toward expressing political opinions on Facebook. Last, the final set of questions was designed to investigate whether Facebook serves as a free and fear-free public sphere in relation to the spiral of silence theory.

3.3. Sample

The study's respondents were recruited based on the following criteria: The respondents are Cambodian citizens of Millennials and Gen Z, aged 19 to 33 years old. These age groups were chosen as they are actively tech-savvy and collectively represent up to 65% of the Cambodian population (Din, 2020).

Respondents were recruited by snowball sampling. The researcher contacted and requested the Politikoffee coordinator via Facebook and Telegram Messenger to recommend participants for the semi-structured interviews.

4. Research Results

4.1. Phase 1: Description of Digital Ethnography through Facebook Analysis

The digital ethnography data were collected by analysing Politikoffee's Facebook Page, which posted 65 pieces of content, covering various topics such as Cambodian politics, human rights, social issues, international relations, international politics, media development and youth empowerment from January 1 to September 30, 2023. The content was posted in the form of event announcements, public opinion discussions and knowledge sharing. Figure 1 illustrates that within nine months of 2023, the Politikoffee Facebook page announced 19

weekly forum topics. However, the number of online engagements on each topic is low, with only 30 comments in total. Most of them consist of positive stickers, while a few are debating comments as shown below:

“What can citizens do to ensure the separation of the three independent powers—legislation, executive and judicial?” (Facebook post on April 27, 2023)

“Why do all Cambodian parties, signatories, nations and the United Nations require Cambodia to establish a constitution based on the principles of the Paris Peace Agreement of October 23, 1991?” (Facebook post on September 21, 2023)

Through digital ethnography data, analysing the online engagement of the comments and reactions reveals that the Politikoffee participants are seemingly fascinated by topics such as politics, economics, corruption, diplomacy, and elections (see Figure 1).

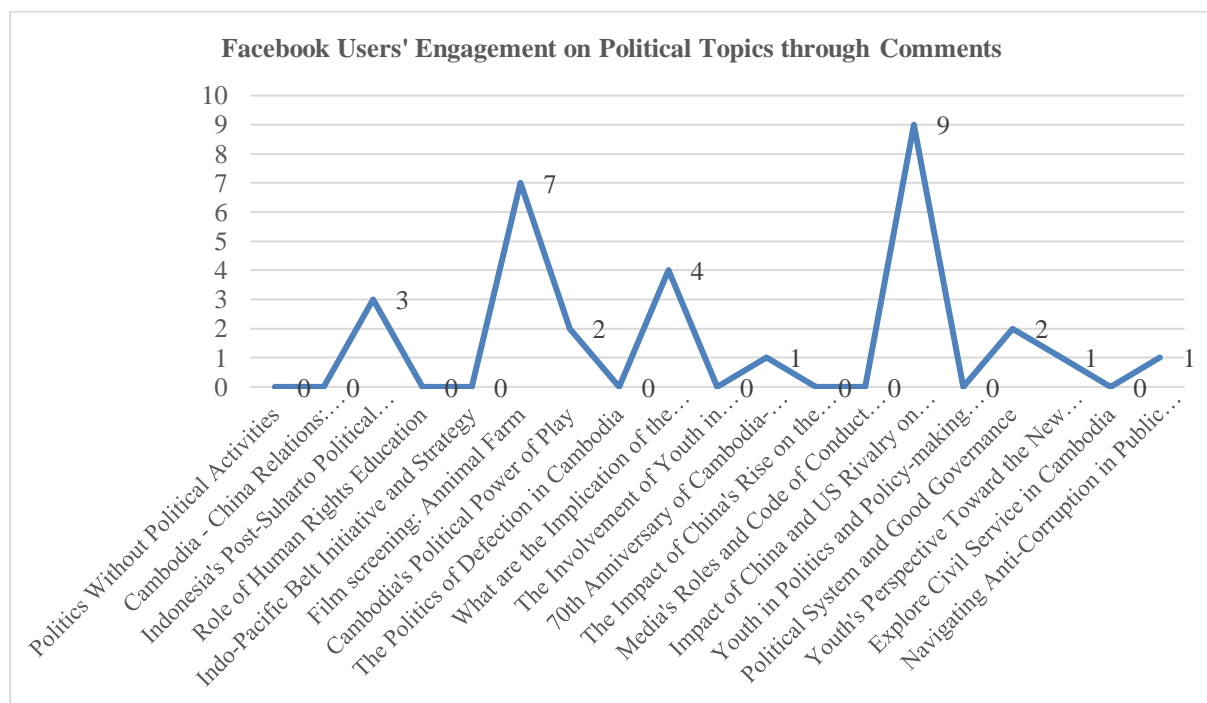


Figure 1: Digital Ethnography Data Collection on the Politikoffee Facebook Page from January 1 to September 30, 2023

	Activity
Weekly Public Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Politics Without Political Activities ▪ Cambodia - China Relations: A Positive-Sum Game? ▪ Indonesia’s Post-Suharto Political Reform and the Rise of Jokowi ▪ Indo-Pacific Belt Initiative and Strategy ▪ Film screening: Animal Farm ▪ Cambodia’s Political Power of Play ▪ The Politics of Defection in Cambodia ▪ What is the Implication of the Success of the Thai Pro-democracy Opposition for Cambodia’s July Election? ▪ The Involvement of Youth in Election Observation ▪ 70th Anniversary of Cambodia-United Kingdom: Understanding the Diplomatic Relations ▪ The Impact of China’s Rise on the Liberal World Order ▪ Media’s Roles and Code of Conduct in Elections ▪ Impact of China and US Rivalry on Cambodia’s Economy ▪ Youth in Politics and Policymaking in Germany ▪ Political System and Good Governance

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Youth's Perspective Toward the New Cabinet of Cambodia ▪ Explore Civil Service in Cambodia ▪ Navigating Anti-Corruption in Public Sector
Opinion Piece	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cambodia's Hidden Killer: The Tragedy of Road Traffic Accidents ▪ Why is Women's Participation in Society Important? ▪ Cambodia's Foreign Policy in Regional Politics ▪ What is Media and Information Literacy? ▪ The Security of Digital Literacy

4.2. Phase 2: Description of the Interview Findings

The sample for this study consists of eight Politikoffee participants, all of whom are Cambodian Facebook users aged between 19 and 33 years old. This group of respondents is actively tech-savvy, representing up to 65% of the Cambodian population (Din, 2020), and can potentially provide more insights and constructive ideas about politics-related issues for this research study. Nearly all of them have an educational background in politics-related subjects, including political science, international relations, law, public policy, and media. Two of the eight respondents are a political advocate and a freelance journalist, identified as public activists who are more willing to disclose their political opinions and confront heterogeneous perspectives. The other six respondents are interested in anonymous political discussion and enthusiastic about broadening their knowledge and understanding of politics. However, they expressed concern and hesitation about publicly expressing their political standpoints. Thus, this finding reveals that social-demographic variables such as employment and education have a dynamic correlation with political opinion disclosure.

Respondent's Demographic Characteristics (n=8)

Gender:

Male 5

Female 3

Age Range: 19-33

Age and Gender:

1st Respondent (22, Male)

2nd Respondent (19, Female)

3rd Respondent (25, Male)

4th Respondent (19, Female)

5th Respondent (20, Male)

6th Respondent (24, Male)

7th Respondent (30, Female)

8th Respondent (33, Male)

Major:

Bachelor of Business Administration

Bachelor of International Relations

Master of Law

Bachelor of International Relations

Bachelor of Political Science

Bachelor of Media and Communication

Master of Public Policy

Bachelor of Media and Communication

Job Occupation:

Political Advocate

Student

Legal Consultant

Student

Student

Freelance Journalist

Student

INGO Staff

Current Residency:

Cambodia and Australia

4.2.1. User's Attitude and Behaviour toward Facebook Usage

In the interview, both R1 and R5 stated that they primarily use Facebook to connect with friends and access a diverse range of political information from digital media outlets, including Radio Free Asia (RFA), Radio France International (RFI), and Voice of America (VOA). For example, R1 and R5 explained:

I use Facebook to connect with friends and share content, including political issues or discussions. That's how I use the platform to receive information as well. (R1, Political Advocate)

I use Facebook to stay updated on politics and diplomacy involving our leaders with other countries worldwide. Additionally, I am enthusiastic about following the political situation in Cambodia and EU countries, the war in Ukraine, the flood in Libya, and the revolution in Myanmar. (R5, Student)

Moreover, R2 mentioned that initially, she used Facebook primarily for communicating with friends. However, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, she began exploring online courses. She used Facebook to connect with online lecturers and discover suitable applications for remote studying. The interview results indicate that respondents use Facebook for three main reasons: 1) to connect with the social community, such as friends and family; 2) to receive and share political and social information; and 3) to seek professional and academic opportunities.

4.2.2. Political Situation in Cambodia

The interview results indicate that Cambodia's current political situation is partly paralysed. During the interview, R6 explained that, in comparison to the law a few years ago, he believes that political opinion expression in Cambodia has improved. However, online discussions only scratch the surface because many people lack political knowledge, and citizens are still afraid to express their opinions on Facebook. Therefore, political opinions on Facebook have many loopholes. R1 viewed the ruling and opposition parties as not working collaboratively, and they could not even have a proper conversation with each other. R1 explained:

The political situation in Cambodia is hopeless because we don't have any potential opposition party to participate in the election. It leaves people no choice in the July 2023 election. As you know, 2 million people supported them in the commune election. By not allowing this party to register in the election, they will remove a party that has 2 million people who are willing to vote for it. (R1, Political Advocate)

Moreover, workplaces have significantly influenced people's political behaviour in Cambodia, often deterring individuals from expressing their political opinions. R8 revealed:

Some institutions discourage staff from expressing political opinions as it can impact the institutions' reputation. The institutions tend to be government-friendly and operate as a development agency, avoiding involvement in political issues. They are indifferent to who leads the country and solely focus on fulfilling their mission. (R8, INGO Staff)

Furthermore, respondents explained that Cambodia's political environment creates discomfort for individuals with diverse perspectives engaging in political discussions, and there is a reluctance to accept differing political views. Specifically, people express concern about the interpretation of the law, as they are unsure whether what they believe is right might be interpreted as wrong. R4 illustrated:

Expressing political opinions on Facebook requires a deep understanding of the context of the discussion. It is generally acceptable when highlighting positive aspects that align with popular sentiments. In contrast, expressing rebellious views could harm employment and the surrounding environment. For example, if colleagues are supporters, expressing negative opinions may lead to workplace conflicts. This is the dynamic influence of why some individuals feel hesitant to openly express their views. A prevailing belief among many Cambodian citizens is encapsulated in the proverb: 'Do not bring an egg to hit a stone', conveying the idea that those with less power might find it risky to challenge those in power. (R4, Student)

The respondents clarified that, for instance, in the context of freedom of expression, people comprehend the law, and their activity is a form of freedom of expression. Conversely, in the political discussion context, freedom of expression can be interpreted in many forms, so when we post, share, or hear comments, we need to double-check and have second thoughts. We need to think about the consequences of our online activities. R4 stated:

I believe that political expression in Cambodia remains constrained because some citizens resist expressing their opinions. They fear engaging in political discussions, as they worry that their expressions might be misinterpreted as protests or against a particular party. They intend not to go against the government but to provide constructive feedback on their loophole. Unfortunately, even when expressing such views, they are often perceived as against the government. This situation prevents

citizens from expressing their genuine political opinions in Cambodia. This behaviour does not align with the true essence of democracy in our country, differing from the democratic practices observed in America and EU countries. (R4, Student)

The absence of freedom of the press also results in the absence of opinion expression, especially when the media cannot fulfil its obligation to seek the truth and report it to the public. R2 mentions that, concerning land concession issues, I observed that the news was not adequately disseminated to the public through traditional media until a Facebook page brought attention to these matters.

4.2.3. The User's Attitudes and Behaviours Toward Political Self-disclosure in Cambodia

To explore the respondents' perspectives toward political opinion expression on Facebook in Cambodia, interviewees were asked a few questions: What is the limited instance of civil discourse that deters them from freely expressing their political point of view on the Politikoffee Facebook group? What do they think about political opinions expressed on social media in Cambodia? Why are they concerned or unconcerned about expressing a political point of view on the Politikoffee Facebook group in Cambodia?

In the interview, R8 depicted that according to institutional law, everyone has the right to express opinions on social media. Still, he practices self-censorship because he believes that freedom of expression in Cambodia remains limited. Criticising societal issues could lead to negative consequences, so he refrains from sharing political opinions. Besides, R1 added that political opinion expression is likely to be worried when users feel suspicious about spies' attempts to monitor online political participation. This suspicion triggers individuals to post political content reluctantly. Otherwise, they need to cautiously verify all the content before posting. These concerns destructively impact the genuine meaning of the message that individuals intend to disseminate. R1 elaborated:

We need to double-check our wording, and sometimes we need to change from one word to another. For example, in the last few weeks, we hosted a film screening event about 'Animal Farm' in the Cambodian language, which would be translated as 'Revolution'. Then, to avoid controversy, we just changed the word 'Revolution' to 'Change'. (R1, Political Advocate)

Consequently, some people decide not to express their opinions publicly. However, they are more likely to be comfortable expressing their opinion in a group such as a messenger or Facebook group. The respondents explained that, although it is still a public space, it has its boundaries and is secure. For example, in the Politikoffee group, there are approximately 2,500 members. Therefore, only 2,500 people could access that content when they expressed their opinions. Each member could not share it with the public, which helped create a comfortable environment for expressing political opinions.

I am willing to express my political opinions in the Politikoffee group because I believe in the confidentiality of the Politikoffee group, and the group has a ground rule not to share those messages outside the group. However, I choose not to express my opinions on public social media platforms because I am concerned about digital footprints, where messages can be easily spread. (R8, INGO Staff)

Comparing online political opinions to in-person discussions, it is much more comfortable to have face-to-face conversations because we can involve more people and exchange knowledge on politics and human rights. People often fear digital surveillance during online discussions, while in-person discussions or closed-door meetings provide a sense of security. (R6, Freelance Journalist)

Given the concern about digital surveillance from various unknown parties, each member seems worried about political opinion expression on Facebook. R1 described:

Some spies or people might want to monitor our discussion. So, getting people to engage in our content is not easy. Also, they are affected by the external environment. For example, they saw a case of their Facebook friends getting a lawsuit because of posting content complaining about any policy or high-ranking government officers, and they got arrested. Thus, some members might get afraid and think our group is unsafe for expressing their opinions. (R1, Political Advocate)

In addition, R4 indicated that opinion expression on social media in Cambodia is complicated due to the prevalence of nepotism. I have observed that whenever one party expresses an opinion, another party opposes and attacks their ideas. For example, R3 explained:

The factors that deter people from political disclosure include fear and the threat of repercussions. In the context of nepotism, individuals residing in the same community or village may face discrimination and encounter difficulties accessing public services if their political views differ from those managing these services. (R3, Legal Consultant)

Taken together, the interview results divulge that in Cambodia, political self-censorship is influenced by socio-psychological factors that deter them from freely expressing their political opinions, such as the restriction of freedom of expression, digital surveillance, cases of political arrest and prevalence of political nepotism.

4.2.4. The Key Findings of User's Political Self-disclosure in Relation to the Spiral of Silence Theory

To examine the political self-disclosure in relation to the spiral of silence theory, respondents were asked a few questions: Are they willing to express their political opinion when most members of the Politikoffee group do not endorse it? What motivates them to participate in the political discussion on Facebook? Are there any social barriers, such as family, friends, colleagues, or government, that can deter them from freely participating in civic discourse?

In the interview, R3 expressed that he refrains from expressing his political opinion if it is not endorsed by most people, as doing so may lead to feeling under pressure after the discussion. R2 added that discussing political issues on Facebook in Cambodia is noticeably limited and almost absent from broader debates. I have observed that each page lacks public engagement, with most participants being individuals studying in that field. For instance, R7 explained:

I am concerned about sharing my political opinions, especially when they lack widespread public support. Despite some people endorsing my views, I still lack confidence in expressing these sensitive opinions openly. Even if I decide to voice them, I find it challenging to express them genuinely from the bottom of my heart because I feel unsafe to fully express such opinions on social media. (R7, Student)

However, R5 believed different groups of people have different political perspectives, and just because the majority does not endorse an opinion. It does not mean that it is wrong. He is willing to express his opinions if they are accurate and do not involve libel or defamation. In addition, R1 said he dared to express his political opinion despite not being endorsed by the majority of the Politikoffee members if he firmly believed his reason was logical. R1 also highlighted that he feels unworried about expressing his opinion in the Facebook group among his friends because they always have political debates and welcome all constructive comments and ideas. In contrast, he feels concerned about publicly disclosing his political argument and needs to discuss it in a smaller group to double-check and confirm with others. If the majority agree with his claim, he will publicly express it. R5 explained:

I have some concerns, but as a youth, I recognise the importance of learning and understanding politics because it is the lifeblood of a country. The stability of political status is crucial for its development. Despite potential threats, I am not afraid because, in a democratic society, freedom of expression is a right granted to citizens by the constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia. This is why I believe freedom of expression is necessary. Furthermore, I never express opinions with the intent of defaming anyone.

My aim is to contribute ideas for social construction and highlight social loopholes. For instance, I have commented on the inactivity of traffic police and politicians to inspire social change. (R5, Student)

The respondents seem more confident publicly sharing their political opinions on Facebook if their identity cannot be revealed. R1 stated:

I will be more confident if my account doesn't represent me. For example, I have another anonymous Facebook account that I can freely engage in both positive and negative opinions online since I believe that the Facebook platform is a place where I can express my opinion freely if my Facebook account is anonymous. (R1, Political Advocate)

If it is an important issue, I believe it is appropriate to share and discuss it on Facebook. If others perceive it as opposing or biased, that's merely their intuitive judgment. However, providing concise evidence to support our thoughts is crucial for others to critically analyse government policies and assess the applicability of policies that can benefit citizens and society. Thus, I am unafraid to voice my political opinions, exercising my freedom of expression. (R6, Freelance Journalist)

Given the embracing of the concept of democracy, some interviewees reported they are confident in providing commentary on political issues through Facebook posts because, as voters, they have the right to express their political opinions. R6 and R2 explained:

I dare to express my political opinions without fear because every citizen is a voter. Hence, we have the right to choose the leaders we believe can lead the country toward development. If we, as voters, lack an understanding of politics, how can we select the right person to be a leader? (R6, Freelance Journalist)

As citizens, we must understand political issues if we aspire for Cambodia to be a democratic country. Without an understanding of politics, our nation's progress may be obstructed, especially since we are the voters and we must be responsible for making decisions that shape the direction of our country. (R2, Student)

Concerning political opinion expression, the Politikoffee team carefully drafted a weekly forum agenda, taking into consideration each member's safety. If a topic sounds sensitive, the team will weigh the potential negative consequences and may opt not to include that sensitive topic. R1 stated:

For example, in our last discussion, we addressed the border issues between Cambodia and Vietnam. During that session, one of our members expressed a differing opinion, stating that discussing this topic could lead to trouble for all of us. The conversation became highly controversial, and we could not host a forum on that topic. (R1, Political Advocate)

Taking a comprehensive look at the societal factors that deter people from expressing their political points of view, R7 explained that citizens may feel reluctant or afraid to disclose their political opinions because our country went through long-standing wars for several years and citizens were traumatised by the wars and mass killing that has deeply influenced their mindset, compelling many to remain silent out of fear. This inclination towards silence, ingrained during the Pol Pot regime, where secrecy was paramount for survival, continues to persist in the Cambodian people's mindset. Even though the younger generation did not directly experience the horrors of the Pol Pot regime, their mindset has been shaped by the narratives passed down from their parents, creating a lasting impact across generations. Furthermore, citizens today are often apprehensive, witnessing the arrest of individuals who express their political opinions without adequate support or solutions. R6 described:

During the recent election, I observed that prominent parties faced restrictions on expressing their political views and were arrested without apparent reasons. This has led citizens to feel apprehensive about voicing their opinions. Additionally, politicians and environmental activists encountered

limitations in expressing their views, with accusations that their actions were influenced by foreign incitement. Consequently, individuals believe their expression is under digital surveillance, particularly on Facebook, a public platform where everyone can readily view them, including those from opposition or ruling parties. This concern stems from the fear of potential threats in the future. (R6, Freelance Journalist)

R1 also elaborated that political knowledge is essential in contributing to active political discussion on Facebook. When he initially engaged in politics, he hesitated to discuss it with others. However, when he became more educated and matured in political discussions with people, holding both like-minded and heterogeneous political perspectives, he discovered approaches to encourage them to join political discussions. R1 explained:

Political knowledge is important. Political education and history are essential topics. When youths have this kind of knowledge, they will be open-minded and confident to discuss political content. (R1, Political Advocate)

Moreover, R6 noted that political knowledge deficiency also deters individuals from expressing political opinions. Many are ill-informed about politics due to limited social media coverage, especially in some rural areas of Cambodia. Consequently, youths and general citizens in rural areas face challenges in staying informed about politics due to poverty and a lack of internet coverage.

5. Discussion

The essential findings from this study can be elucidated as follows: Most respondents tend to utilise Facebook for three main purposes: 1) to connect with their social community, such as friends and family, 2) to receive and share political and social information, and 3) to seek professional and academic opportunities. This result is consistent with other researchers. For instance, Gil De Zúñiga et al. (2012) discovered that users utilise social media platforms such as Facebook to participate in civic and political discourse. Cambodians use Facebook for entertainment, daily information, and opinion expression (Chunly, 2019; Vorn & Ly, 2020). Simultaneously, respondents also use Facebook for social capital. Ellison et al. (2007) assert that social capital is crucial in social media usage as individuals use a platform to enhance their mutual and close relationships. Moreover, it helps them to stay connected with friends and communities, facilitating the formation of new connections.

5.1. User's Perception Toward Political Discourse on Facebook in Relation to the Spiral of Silence

This study interprets the interview data in conjunction with the spiral of silence theory and other critical concepts to explore socio-psychological factors that influence Facebook users to suppress and express their opinions on online political platforms. In examining the spiral of silence theory to comprehend whether Facebook is a free without-fear public sphere, the findings discover that users seem concerned about political self-disclosure. The respondents are more willing to express their political opinions in the smaller Facebook group or through an anonymous account. Exceptionally, only respondents whose occupations as political advocates and journalists actively engage with political or social issues, are more inclined to express their political opinions on Facebook. This result strikes the critical findings that the respondents' political self-disclosure is also slightly influenced by corrective action because some people are more likely to confront heterogeneous opinions. However, it is essential to note that these expressions are not necessarily endorsed by a broader audience or the majority. Duncan et al. (2020) confirm that corrective action refers to people with firm ideas that are unlikely to alter their standpoint. They will vigorously continue expressing their opinion despite being endorsed by merely the minority. This is especially true when respondents are confident in their political opinion expression and have concrete reasons that are unlikely to alter their views. If an individual's perception is strongly influenced by corrective action, he or she will be less likely to be swayed by the spiral of silence.

Generally, a significant number of respondents still feel reluctant to publicly reveal their political ideas on Facebook due to pressure from various socio-psychological factors. These include the limitation of freedom of

expression, concerns about the safety of their digital footprint, worries about digital surveillance, the fear of political arrests, and a deficiency in political knowledge. These factors collectively contribute to triggering self-censorship among the respondents. Moreover, political traumatising serves as a longstanding and prevailing socio-psychological factor that destructively influences and instils fear in Cambodian people's minds, inhibiting them from expressing their opinions due to the historical context of wars and mass killings, exemplified by the civil war under the Pol Pot regime.

Simultaneously, the limited internet coverage in rural areas poses a significant obstacle for youth and the Cambodian population in general. This limitation hinders their ability to access political and societal information adequately, resulting in political illiteracy and discouraging people from confidently engaging in political discussion. This research finding aligns with the perspectives of various researchers. For example, Hampton et al. (2014) argue that people's perceptions are influenced by 'fear of ostracism or ridicule' (p. 1), knowledge deficiency (Geiger & Swim, 2016) and concerns about digital surveillance (Liu et al., 2017). In this context, the attitudes and behaviours of respondents can lead to cognitive dissonance. Kopp et al. (2019) assert that the concept of cognitive dissonance, or called psychological discomfort, arises when people's behaviours are inconsistent with their beliefs and values. Individuals tend to avoid expressing their opposing thoughts with their friends to maintain harmony and their friendship on social media (Duncan et al., 2020). In this sense, the respondents' political self-disclosure may result in a spiral of silence. This aligns with Noelle-Neumann's (1974) assertion that individuals remain silent and conform to prevailing opinions despite disagreeing with them. This reluctance is driven by the fear of making a mistake, being alone and lacking confidence in their decision-making abilities.

6. Conclusion

The study divulges that Facebook has expanded the public space available for Cambodian youths to access more political information. However, a significant portion of individuals remain apprehensive and hesitant to express their political opinions on Facebook. This reluctance results from various factors, including constraints on freedom of expression, the fear of political arrests, the pervasiveness of political nepotism, concerns about digital surveillance, the insecurity of digital footprints, a lack of political knowledge, and the traumatising effects of civil wars.

The study indicates that socio-demographic variables, such as education, employment status, and age significantly shape users' attitudes and behaviours concerning political opinions disclosure on the digital platform. The results indicate that individuals with roles as political advocates and journalists actively involved in political or social issues are more inclined to express their political opinions on Facebook. Therefore, future researchers should focus on the examination of the influence of users' social-demographic variables on political opinion disclosure.

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