THE ALTERNATE CHANNEL:
HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS CHALLENGING THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE
THEORY IN GLBT COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

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Abstract

This study explores the rise of the social media trend in mass media and how social media usage by the underrepresented and historically silent GLBT communities of color is challenging the traditional public opinion theory of the spiral of silence. This study explores how the GLBT community is using social media as a vehicle for communication about issues pertinent to their community. To understand how GLBT communities and GLBT communities of color are using social networking sites, I conducted an exploratory analysis of four general GLBT-focused social networking sites and blogs. Then I did an exploratory analysis of eight GLBT of color-focused social networking sites and blogs. Social media’s open platform and broad reach not only provides the GLBT of color community access to supporters, but also each other. Using social media, specifically social networking sites and blogs, GLBT persons of color are interacting with one another in ways never before experienced. This study unearths the reasons behind the social networking trends of a group that has been largely ignored in American mass media and culture.
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To my ancestors whose shoulders I stand upon. To the orisa, whose energies surround, protect and support me always. To my mother and father whose unwavering support and unconditional love were instrumental on this journey. To my partner whose strength, love and encouragement pulled me out of low spaces. To Dr. Zaharna for her unrelenting guidance, leadership and wisdom during this process. To the sisters and brothers I call “family” for being the inspiration for this project. -- SN
Table of Contents

I. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 5

II. THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE THEORY.... 8
   A Look at the Spiral of Silence – 30 Years Later ...............................................................11
   The Evolution of the Spiral of Silence ............................................................................15
   Some Current Applications of the Spiral of Silence Theory ...........................................18

III. TREND OVERVIEW ..................................................................................................... 22
   The Traditional Relationship with Traditional Media .......................................................22
   The Rise of Social Media .................................................................................................23
   The Trend in the GLBT Community ................................................................................24

IV. EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS......................................................................................... 26
   Analysis of General GLBT Sites ....................................................................................26
   Analysis of GLBT of Color Sites ...................................................................................30
   An Analysis of the Trend Through The Spiral of Silence .............................................35

V. CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................... 38

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................... 41
I. Introduction

“No person is your friend who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow”

- Alice Walker

The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) community has not always been as vocal they are today. They have been silent and underrepresented for many years due to the blatant intolerance of homosexuality by society at large. The GLBT community of color has been especially silent for the very same reasons in addition to the challenges of racial discrimination that have been present in the United States for centuries. Due to these cultural and historical influences GLBT communities of color remain a step behind the general GLBT community in terms of burgeoning acceptance or even comfortable disclosure. Now with the advent of social media, forums are forming, conversations are being shared and activist voices are reaching out to mass audiences. The purpose of this study is to explore how social media is opening the way for activism, networking and interaction within the largely silent, and underrepresented GLBT community of color – and in the process, challenging the spiral of silence.

Introduced in 1974, the spiral of silence theory is one that explores hypotheses to determine why some groups remain silent while others are more vocal in forums of public discourse. The theory contends that the silence displayed by certain groups is due to the unpopularity of their opinions in the public sphere. While the majority groups are supported by and consequently
have the willingness to speak out on their issues, the minority groups remain silent due to a fear of isolation. Over the past 30 years the spiral of silence theory has evolved and in this paper I will explore some of the adaptations. However, this paper will focus more directly on how the GLBT community of color, a once voiceless community is breaking their spiral of silence through the use of social media channels.

This study is significant because it is unique in its approach to a subject that is largely ignored. There exists very little information to support the study giving way to mostly primary research in order to show the findings. This study’s significance lies not only in the unique subject of focus, but also in the approach to challenging the original spiral of silence theory. This study will be beneficial to future communication researchers as well as communication professionals interested in learning how to reach or attract the interests of members of the GLBT community of color.

This study has several limitations. It is incomplete in some respects, yet focused only on the specifics pertaining to social media influence on GLBT communities of color and how it reshapes the spiral of silence theory within that group. What this study does not show are the purchasing habits of the GLBT of color community. This study does not list all of the sites and blogs that GLBT persons of color frequently visit. This study also does not directly nor indirectly compare and contrast between the general GLBT community and the of color segment of the GLBT community.
The overview of this study is outlined in the following five sections. The first section is the Introduction, which introduces the problem, study purpose significance, background, limitations and overview. The second section is the origin and evolution of the spiral of silence theory. Section 2 provides and explanation of Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) spiral of silence theory in layman’s terms by highlighting the origins of the theory as well as its evolution or any controversy surrounding it. The third section discusses the relationship between people and traditional media, the rise of social networking sites, the general trend within the GLBT community as well as the general trend within GLBT communities of color. The fourth section presents the data and results from an exploratory analysis of the trend. The final section provides the summary of research findings, study significance and purpose and indicates areas for future research.
II. The Origin and Evolution of the Spiral of Silence Theory

The Spiral of Silence

The spiral of silence is a mass communication theory introduced by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974) to describe the process of public opinion formation. Noelle-Neumann defines the “spiral of silence” as the process an individual experiences when “he may find that the views he holds are losing ground; the more this appears to be so, the more uncertain he will become of himself, and the less he will be inclined to express his opinion” (p. 44). The lack of self-certainty that the author speaks of is fueled by how an individual perceives his social environment. Noelle-Neumann calls this the “quasi-statistical picture of the distribution of opinions.”

The author also says that how an individual’s views his social environment is strongly influenced by mass media. If the individual sees the more prevalent opinion (not his own), more and more in his social environment, he becomes less inclined to voice his own opinion publicly. As the author puts it, “the tendency of the one to speak up and the other to be silent starts off a spiraling process which increasingly establishes one’s opinion as the prevailing one” (p. 44). Thereby, public opinion is identified, by the silenced individual as the opinion that is generally acceptable by the public and can be voiced openly with no fear.

Noelle-Neumann goes on to say that the individual who has the opposing opinion will eventually experience feelings of isolation or a “danger of isolation if
their views are publicly or openly expressed, they risk being isolated from the majority. Noelle-Neumann draws upon classical writers of public opinion to attributes/explain this concept/reaction by individuals. For example, Tonnies wrote, “Public opinion always claims to be authoritative. It demands consent or at least compels silence, or abstention from contradiction” (Tonnies cited by Noelle-Neumann, p. 43). Similarly, Bryce wrote that there exists “a majority which remains silent because it feels itself defeated” (Bryce cited by Noelle-Neumann, p. 44).

Noelle-Neumann developed five hypotheses on which to test the spiral of silence theory. The hypotheses were formulated based on prominent theories and core concepts of public opinion. The first hypothesis posits that individuals form a picture of the distribution of opinion in their social environment and of the trend of opinion. They observe which views are gaining strength and which are declining. Here, the author states that the individual pays close attention to what is happening in his social environment because it helps to determine “how far [he] expects to expose himself publicly on a particular subject” (p. 45). The second hypothesis posits that willingness to expose one’s views publicly varies according to the individual’s assessment of the frequency distribution and the trend of opinions in his social environment. It is greater if he believes his own view is, and will be, the dominating one or is becoming widespread (p. 45). If the individual sees that his opinion is favored in the public, he will be more willing to express it. The third hypothesis posits that if the individual’s assessment of the current distribution and the actual distribution are not congruent, “it is because
the opinion whose strength is overestimated is displayed more in public” (p. 45). The fourth hypothesis posits that in terms of assessment of public opinion, “there is a positive correlation between the present and the future. If an opinion is [presently] considered to be the prevailing one, it is likely to be considered the future one also. The weaker the correlation, the more public opinion is going through a process of change” (p. 45). The final hypothesis posits that if an individual thinks that “the trend of opinion is moving his way, the risk of isolation is of little significance” (p. 45).

Noelle-Neumann tested these hypotheses through a number of surveys conducted in the early 1970s. A key finding from her research was that when faced with public opinion, a small core group of silent minorities were less likely to conform in any way. What they were willing to do was support their opinions by selecting persons and media that confirm their views. In this way, this group was more comfortable seeking out ways and support methods for comfortably expressing their views and opinions rather than pretending to accept prevailing views that were counter to their own.

Noelle-Neumann’s study points out the assumption that the mass media does influence public opinion, but is not clear about the kind of relationship that exists between the two. The author draws attention to the link between the observations that an individual makes of his social environment and his own convictions. She calls the interaction between the two a principal feature of the process of public opinion formation. She opines that, “mass media are a part of the system which the individual uses to gain information about the environment.
For all questions outside his immediate personal sphere, he is most dependent on mass media for the facts and for his evaluation of the climate of opinion” (p. 51). Noelle-Neumann introduced the term “quasi-statistical sense” to denote an individual’s awareness of their social environment.

Noelle-Neumann addresses the question of whether mass media serves with an “agenda-setting function” or from a sense of urgency. She says that there have been “scientific discussions” about whether the media are “the mirror or the molder of public opinion”. The author concludes that when it comes to the spiral of silence, mass media “provide the environmental pressure to which people respond with alacrity (happiness), or with acquiescence, or with silence” (p. 51).

**A Look at the Spiral of Silence – 30 Years Later**

In the last 30 years since the spiral of silence was introduced as a mass communication theory, there have been many adaptations and challenges to its hypotheses. The core theory, remains in tact, however it has expanded over time through new research and academic discourse. Dietram Scheufele (2007) is known for his work on mass communication theory, including the spiral of silence theory. He recently completed a review of studies related to the spiral of silence theory.

Scheufele opines that the quasi-statistical sense is not accurate all the time. He goes on to state that there may be times when a person’s perception may be awry. Be that as it may, Scheufele connects and confirms, “it is the perception of opinion distribution rather than the real opinion climate that shapes people’s willingness to express their opinions in public” (p. 175).
The author also discusses the aspect of the fear of isolation. He writes that the concept is formed by groups who threaten the individuals who oppose social norms and majority views. Scheufele says that the isolation is a fear that individuals with opposing views have because they see their viewpoint as going against social norms. The author adds that Noelle-Neumann’s theory was borne from two schools of theory, one being the philosophical and the other the social-psychological.

Scheufele makes a very poignant note that the spiral of silence theory is a “dynamic process” or a process that works over time (p. 176). During these long stretches of time, the minority loses their will to express their opinion, slowing falling silent, the majority slowly begins to rise to the top. The majority viewpoint is eventually seen not only as the prevailing one, but also as the one that evolves into a social norm. He also states that the minority group’s silence is what fuels the bias that supports the majority voice. The more silent one group is, the more popular and noticeable the other group becomes. The more popular one group becomes, the less compelled the minority group is to be expressive. Scheufele writes that this cycle, the spiral of silence, “only works for issues with a moral component, or value-laden issues” (p. 176).

Scheufele concurs with Noelle-Neumann that mass media also plays a crucial role in enabling the spiral of silence. He calls this role a “dual climate of opinion” (p. 176). He states that the media is very often a source of information for people about topics they have little or no information about. If the individual does not yet have an understanding of or opinion about a particular issue, the
media gives them a perspective, shed in a particular light that then guides their opinion. This dual climate of opinion occurs when different groups have different opinions on a topic, but the “perceptions of which group is winning or losing the debate are just the opposite” (p. 176).

Scheufele also addresses the role of social groups as they pertain to the spiral of silence. He defines them in two ways, as a source of “important social cues when people try to gauge the social climate of opinion” (p. 179). The second is as a source of protection for people who choose to resist opinion climates and decide to go up against the hostility that some opinion climates may hold. This second group is whom Noelle-Neummann calls the “avant-gardes” or the “hard cores” (p. 179). Hard cores tend to stay true to their existing opinions regarding an issue even while there is growing opposition. Avant-gardes, however, are more vocal with their viewpoints that oppose the social norms. They also promote “new, unpopular viewpoints that go against existing social norms of predominant opinion climates” (p. 179). Avant-gardes use reference groups to support their existing beliefs and base their resistance to hostile climates on that support as well as on their own ideologies surrounding a particular issue.

Scheufele addresses the spectrum of critique on the spiral of silence theory. He states that the aspects of the theory that were first criticized are the same areas that have proven most beneficial for new research. One of the most criticized topics is the “willingness to self-censor” which was a term borne from Noelle-Neummann’s “fear of isolation” (p. 179). The willingness to self-censor
became a hypothesis that was tested and measured thereby setting it apart from simply being a concept (p. 179). Noelle-Neumann’s original spiral of silence writing was also criticized for its focus on the “fear of isolation” as the only factor preventing the individual from speaking out. Over time, other researchers have proposed additional factors that may be related to the fear of speaking out. A common element among the additional factors is that respondents are more likely to speak out despite the climate of public opinion against them if they are: younger, male, or extremely passionate about the issue (p. 180).

The role of reference groups has also evolved as a source of criticism over the years. Some researchers say that reference groups provide an individual with bias in terms of how he/she views the actual social climate. For example, Moy, Domke & Stamm (2001), state that when asked to assess the broader climate of opinion individuals may “project from their experiences in reference groups to the world around them” (p. 180). Recent adaptation of the role of reference groups is that they are the primary threat to the individual experiencing fear because the opinions of the reference group can become more important than the societal climate of opinion. This particular theory regarding reference groups was successfully tested using the topic of affirmative action (p. 180).

Scheufele writes that of all the tests and critical viewpoints surrounding the spiral of silence, the focus is always centered on the factors causing an individual to self-censor or not self-censor. He opines that the questions should shift and ask, “Under what circumstances does the spiral of silence work better, and what
are the variables that can attenuate the relationships between fear of isolation, perceptions of the opinion climate, and willingness to speak out” (p. 182). He further states that researchers should look at the cultural influence in the willingness factor in order to further expand the theory instead of using it as a pervasive concept for all cultures.

The Evolution of the Spiral of Silence

Scheufele and Patricia Moy (2000) wrote an analysis of the spiral of silence spanning 25 years of its existence in public opinion research and discourse. The comprehensive contents of Schefele and Moy’s article explored the numerous theoretical and conceptual perspectives that other writers have penned since Noelle-Neumann’s 1974 introduction of the spiral of silence. The article also offered suggestions for future research that had not been examined at the time of the writing.

The authors begin by stating that the spiral of silence theory has created somewhat incongruent findings on the subject of “majority opinion and an individual’s willingness to express his or her opinion” (p. 4). The authors wrote that the three factors contributing to the inconsistencies are conceptual, having to do with the measurement of variables throughout the process and the lack of attention to certain macroscopic variables. Of the macroscopic variables left largely untapped over the 25-year exploration of the spiral of silence theory, the authors identify “cross-cultural comparisons” as the one requiring significant focus.
Scheufele and Moy dissect the definition of public opinion by referencing two concepts offered by Noelle-Neumann (1995). The first is “Public opinion as rationality” and the second is “public opinion as social control” (p. 4). Public opinion as rationality is a conscious process that comes about after careful consideration and public discussion. The authors term it as “a necessary condition for generating social change” (p. 5). In the form of rationality, public opinion uses several modes of expression such as, facial expressions and highly visible symbols. Public opinion as social control is an opinion that, when expressed, does not lead to the risk of isolation from society, by society. The authors write that this format rises from the unconscious. They are “opinions that have to be expressed in order to avoid isolation” (p. 5). In the form of social control, public opinion uses a more pervasive and “cue” based influencer from observations made of society at large. The writers opine that the spiral of silence “clearly falls under the model of public opinion as social control” (p. 5).

The authors outline the spiral of silence using Noelle-Neumann’s (1991) five hypotheses that are expansions of her original 1974 writing. They are the threat of isolation, fear of isolation, quasi-statistical sense, willingness to speak out/tendency to remain silent and spiral of silence. Schuefele and Moy also add three more factors in explaining the spiral of silence as a process. The three are the moral component of public opinion, the time factor and the role of the media (p. 8-11).

The authors not only clearly outline the conceptual and theoretical approaches that have been written over the last 25 years, but they offer their
suggestions for future research based on these approaches. The three-part
outline includes “an outline of key variables, including the criterion 'opinion
expression' and related measurement issues”, the reference group factor as it
pertains to the process of the spiral of silence, and the spiral of silence “in the
context of cross-cultural research” (p. 14).

The authors address the cross-cultural aspect by positing “the distinction
between “individualism and collectivism” as it pertains to one’s cultural framework
could be a distinguishing factor of “people’s willingness to speak out beyond
more temporally-bound perceptions of opinion climates” (p. 19). The authors
conclude by writing of the importance for researchers to turn to a more
macroscopic focus of the spiral of silence theory as opposed to the oversaturated
microscopic focus that has dominated the last 25 years. They argue that the
spiral of silence theory is indeed a macroscopic theory and posit, “not only can
macro-theoretical approaches, like the spiral of silence, explain micro-
inconsistencies on an empirical level, but a macroscopic focus is very likely the
key to re-conceptualizing and defining concepts like hardcores and avant-gardes
that have been somewhat neglected in previous research on the spiral of silence”
(p. 21).
Some Current Applications of the Spiral of Silence Theory

Frances Bowen and Kate Blackmon (2003) used the spiral of silence theory to support their writing on the dynamics of gays and lesbians choice to speak out or remain silent within workplace organizations. The authors address the willingness to speak out dynamic by positing that there is a second spiral of silence that exists on a “micro level within the workgroup and organization” (p. 1393). This sub spiral comes from an existing “negative climate of opinion” in the work environment that renders the gay or lesbian individual to hide their sexual orientation. The authors call this “organizational silence” (p. 1394). The opposite of organizational silence is organizational voice, which the authors describe as a voluntary and open disclosure of personal views in order to affect change within and organization.

Bowen and Blackmon write that people who have “invisible” differences like that of sexual orientation have a choice to make about whether they are open about it or not in the workplace. The authors begin by describing the spiral of silence theory as one that identifies a link between people’s willingness to express their opinion and the influences of “external forces such as the media” (p. 1395). The media is described much like Noelle-Neumann (1974) as an influencer or guide for one’s perception of the “prevailing climate of opinion” (p. 1396).

The authors go on to explain that the majority opinion has a controlling effect on an individual’s decision to speak out because of fear of isolation. Bowen and Blackmon then attribute the aspect of “morally-laden issues” to the driving
force behind the fear of isolation by using the topic of the military’s ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy as an example (p. 1396). The authors write that within the workplace environment some members may be considered as part of the “in group” due to their commonalities. Likewise those who do not possess the same commonalities are considered part of the “out group” (p. 1398). In order to seem part of the majority in-group, gays and lesbians may choose to keep their sexual orientation hidden from their co-workers or decide to change the way they behave in order to fit in. The authors call this form of repression “an individual self-censoring spiral of silence” (p. 1400). The authors posit that most gays and lesbians in the workplace take a careful look at the organizational climate before making a decision to “out” themselves. The consideration is based on whether the workplace climate is “likely to be supportive or not” (p. 1401).

Bowen and Blackmon opine that the decision to hide such an important part of one’s personal identity can be harmful to the individual as well as their work environment. It prevents others at work from getting to know who you really are and creates a stressful and unproductive experience for the one who is hiding. The authors write, “making an invisible identity visible may be more beneficial for social exchange than maintaining invisibility, since less effort must be spent on monitoring oneself” (p. 1406). The authors write that, for gay and lesbian employees, it is not only a question of whether to ‘out’ themselves at work, but also to whom.

The authors conclude that understanding the spiral of silence is a useful integration for managers and leadership teams. They write that such an
understanding “may prevent ‘pluralistic ignorance’ from disrupting group and organizational processes related to diversity” (p. 1413).

Shirley Ho (2008) writes that a minority group’s reluctance to speak out because of fear of isolation can hinder the process of public deliberation. Ho describes public deliberation as an essential aspect of democracy. In her article, Ho explains that the unwillingness to speak out is by a “dysfunctional social-psychological process” (p. 190). The author adds that computer-mediated tools are one of the ways that this dysfunctional process can be overcome while still rendering the minority group able to contribute to the process of public deliberation. She writes, “computer-mediated communication (CMC) may have the potential to create an environment conducive for public deliberation by attenuating the effects of the undesirable social-psychological influences on opinion expression” (p. 191). The author uses attributes of the spiral of silence theory such as “fear of isolation, communication apprehension and perceived current and future congruency” to support her writing (p. 191).

Ho writes that one’s experience during face-to-face (FTF) interaction gives access to facial expressions and other social cues in order to determine the speaker’s intent. However, in CMC those additional factors are not present and the user may perceive the same response with a completely different affect. Supported by previous studies by Siegel (1996) and Gallupe, Bastianutti & Cooper (1991) of CMC providing a veil of anonymity for minority group users, the author offers a hypothesis based that “individuals who are asked to speak out in the FTF setting will be less likely to express their opinions that those who are
asked to speak out in the CMC setting” (p. 193). The author argues that the “fear of isolation should be dependent on the communication setting” (p. 194).

Ho writes of mass media’s effect on people’s willingness to speak out and uses the topic of same-sex marriage as a morally laden issue upon which to test her hypothesis. Her research provided controls for demographics, media usage variables. The controls were based on studies by Lasorsa (1991), and Gonzenbach, King, & Jablonski (1999), showing that variables such as age and gender are “associated with willingness to speak out on controversial issues” (p. 195). Specifically, women and the elderly are “generally less likely to state their opinions” (p. 195).

Her findings conclusively displayed that “respondents were more reluctant to express opinions in the FTF setting than in the online chat room setting” (p. 200). The author also discovered that media influence, fear of isolation, communication apprehension and future opinion congruence were all influencers of the results. She writes that “these findings suggest that unique features such as anonymity and reduced social cues in computer-mediated discussion may be able to abate some of the dysfunctional social-psychological influence on opinion expression and create an environment conducive for public deliberation” (p. 201).
III. Trend Overview

One can see various trends emerging these days regarding the rise of social media and the consequent transition among audiences from their traditional relationship with mass media. This section will focus on that transition as well as the rise of the social networking trend, the general trend within GLBT communities and how the trend has become a vehicle for giving voice GLBT communities of color.

The Traditional Relationship with Traditional Media

Much is being written these days about the transition from traditional media consumption to online media consumption. Within those articles lay varying support of the transition as well as arguments against it. There is undoubtedly a shift occurring, however there still exists a noteworthy relationship between people and traditional media. Traditional media, or mass media consists of a group of “media institutions” that include newspapers, magazines, books, film, radio and television (Chaffee and Metzger 2001, 366). The stream of information through mass media has traditionally been homogenized. Producers and writers at large media organizations determine content for the public. As Chaffee and Metzger write, “The bigness and fewness of the mass media meant that only a handful of gatekeepers made decisions about what media content would be distributed widely to the population” (p. 366). Hence, the lack of civic control or input over traditional media over the past seven decades has rendered
people’s relationship with media as one-dimensional, or “a model of exploitation and one-way influence” (p. 368).

While some scholars have opined and analyzed whether people’s use of traditional media is declining, other researchers contend that people are actually redefining their relationship with traditional media. People are now opening up to other sources of news and information. Douglas Ahlers and John Hessen (2005) write that people are using new media not as an alternative to traditional media but rather as a complement (p. 65).

Statistics indicate that people are ending their one-dimensional relationship with traditional media and becoming more involved with how they get their information. In 2005 newspaper circulation declined 1.9 percent and more than 15 percent in total circulation. In 2005, the viewing power of television declined 17 percent from it’s 76% high in 1993 (p. 65).

The Rise of Social Media

The declines experienced by the mass media can unanimously be attributed to digital media. Digital media, social media, social networks, electronic media, are names that are all synonymous with the trend of present-day media consumption. Social networking sites and blogs have been increasing in popularity to the extent that even large media outlets are paying attention. According to a 2008 report issued by Universal McCann “57 percent of internet users are now members of a social network” (Richard McManus, Read Write Web, April 28, 2008).
Social network sites offer users the opportunity to connect to a wide range of people in a broader area of scope. These sites feature, not only avenues for connection to other people, but access to news, entertainment, sports, business and weather updates.

The history of social networking sites began in 1997 with a site called SixDegrees.com. This site gave users the ability to create personal profile pages, list their friends and, beginning in 1998, “surf the friends lists” (Boyd and Ellison 2007, 4). In 2001 a site called Ryze.com came into being and gave users the ability to “leverage their business networks” (p. 4). Since then, social networking sites including niche sites that target specific genres have been launched and continue to boost the numbers of internet users who were formally inactively browsing the web into actively engaged social networkers. Boyd and Ellison state that this rise shows a significant trend that “SNSs are primarily organized around people, not interests” (p. 9).

The Trend in the GLBT Community

Niche social networking sites and blogs are generally attractive to users who seek information specific to their personal interests. The GLBT community is a niche group that has actively harnessed the power of social networking sites and blogs to their advantage. The success of GLBT sites serves as a testament to Universal McCann’s assessment that “some of the more successful social network sites are ones that have been able to have a common purpose to generate content” (Universal McCann 2006, 5).
Harris Interactive in collaboration with global market research and consulting firm, Witeck-Combs, issued a national survey in 2008 that states “gay and lesbian adults online are reading more blogs than their heterosexual counterparts” and “42% of gay and lesbian adults have visited an online social community or network in the last month” (Harris Interactive, 1).
IV. Exploratory Analysis

In order to understand how GLBT communities and GLBT communities of color are using social networking sites, I conducted an exploratory analysis of four general GLBT-focused social networking sites and blogs. Then I did an exploratory analysis of eight GLBT of color social networking sites and blogs. All of the sites were selected based on prominent search engine listings of the top sites relative to each group.

In this exploratory analysis I looked at what users were doing on the sites. More specifically, I spent time browsing through the forums and user pages in order to discern the most popular topics, the most popular forums, unique site features and the degree to which sites were actively updated and users were actively engaged in voicing their opinions. I counted the number of forums on certain topics in order to deduce the popularity of certain topics and read blogs to identify language and tone relative to how morally laden issues were presented, addressed and responded to. Finally, I used the findings to explore the significances and potential challenges to the spiral of silence theory.

Analysis of General GLBT Sites

Gays.com is an up and coming general GLBT social networking site that offers a “real” user experience (Gays.com, 2009). The notion of keeping the experience real is achieved by linking users to one another based on the given geographic area. Once members have signed up, their geographic location is filtered and matched with other members in the same area inspiring real life
meetings and interactions in order to take the connection to the next level. The site encourages community building and networking beyond the computerized experience. Dating is a popular topic on this site. The membership at a glance appears to comprise an 18-25 year old user audience.

Varietyq.com and Dlist.com are specialty sites within the general GLBT social network genre. Varietyq.com is a site that is very basic in its design and encourages users to visit to their “community” page before deciding whether to continue on and join. Each community is its own niche within the general GLBT community. The six communities are parents, dating and networking, general lesbian interests, African American lesbian interests, the African American gay community and GLBT singles and couples interested in interracial relationships. Members can create and post their own profiles and blogs. Membership to Varietyq.com can be free or paid. Paid membership offers additional features and access to the site and the dues are donated to charitable organizations within the GLBT community.

Dlist.com’s exclusivity lies in its target audience and membership rules. This site features an exclusive all-male focus and requires a photo to be uploaded in order to attain membership. The site encourages pride in one’s physical appearance and promotes physical fitness throughout its pages. The content is of a highly sexual nature.

Glee.com has introduced job search features in collaboration with Monster.com, a popular mainstream Internet job search agent. The addition of this feature serves to broaden the range of interests and offer users a more
comprehensive experience while visiting the site. With a user interface similar to that of Facebook®, the site offers a diverse range of features such as informative and supportive group bulletin boards, the most popular of which focus on GLBT identity issues and topics. Of the sites I reviewed, Glee.com has the most presence. The color and main page content are inviting and informational for first-time users.

Chart 1 provides an overview profile of the target audience demographic, type of membership and general content areas for the four general GLBT social networking sites that were reviewed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Name</th>
<th>Target Audience</th>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Content Areas</th>
<th>Focused GLBT Demographic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glee.com</td>
<td>GLBT</td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Personal profiles, personal blogs, job searches, video sharing, news, entertainment, group bulletin boards</td>
<td>General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varietyq.com</td>
<td>GLBT</td>
<td>Free/paid. Paid membership dues go to non-profit charities</td>
<td>Networking, dating, community activism</td>
<td>General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dlist.com</td>
<td>GLBT (men)</td>
<td>Exclusive</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>General (men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gays.com</td>
<td>GLBT</td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Social networking based on users’ geographic area, dating, personal interests and hobbies</td>
<td>General</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After looking at word and theme usage, my analysis revealed that the general GLBT social networking sites feature dating as the most popular member
area. Most site profiles and personal blog content show subject matter and
descriptions designed to attract another for love or a dating experience.

I conducted a site analysis using Compete.com. In order to generate the
results, I entered the URLs of each site I reviewed and submitted a request for a
standard one-year track showing how many unique monthly visitors visited each
site per month.

Chart 2: Unique Visitor Tracking of General GLBT Sites

The results reflect each site's popularity by showing how many users
visited each one over the year. As you can see from the chart, Glee.com has the
highest trend of unique visitors to their site from July 2009 with 20,000 visitors to
March 2009 with 170,000 visitors. Compete.com was not able to provide any
information about Varietyq.com nor Gays.com.
Analysis of GLBT of Color Sites

Downelink.com is considered the premier social networking site for GLBT communities of color. In my review I found that social networking-focused sites other than Downelink, solely targeting the GLBT community of color are present and active yet do not beckon many users. The GLBT community of color has seen considerable and noteworthy activity through the use of blogs and sites focused on arts and activism. Of the eight GLBT of color-focused sites I reviewed, four of them are blogs. My review did not cover the activity of GLBT persons of color using general GLBT sites for social networking.

Chart 3 provides an overview profile of the target audience demographic, type of membership and general content areas for the eight GLBT of color-focused social networking sites that were reviewed.

Chart 3: Profile of GLBT of color Sites and Blogs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Name</th>
<th>Target Audience</th>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Content Areas</th>
<th>Focused GLBT Demographic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Downelink.com</td>
<td>GLBT</td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Dating, social networking, vlogs, blogs and group forums</td>
<td>Gays and lesbians of color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacklesbianetwork.com</td>
<td>GLBT</td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Artist collectives, writer networking, article submissions, travel, film and book reviews, clothing sales</td>
<td>Black lesbians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbianofcolor.blogspot.com</td>
<td>GLBT</td>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Daily updates on multicultural lesbian</td>
<td>Lesbians of color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Name</td>
<td>Target Audience</td>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>Content Areas</td>
<td>Focused GLBT Demographic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keithboykin.com (blog)</td>
<td>All-inclusive</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>National news and views traditional and alternative</td>
<td>General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboutwomyn.com (blog)</td>
<td>GLBT</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Event coverage, Asian lesbians in pop culture</td>
<td>Asian lesbians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break the Silence (LIA blog)</td>
<td>GLBT, all-inclusive</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Petitions and art supporting the plight of lesbians in India</td>
<td>Indian lesbians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenyonfarrow.com (blog)</td>
<td>GLBT of color community</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>News and views specifically for and about the GLBT of color community</td>
<td>Gays and lesbians of color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nativeout.org</td>
<td>GLBT</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Blogs, news and views, event coverage, activism regarding the Native American GLBT movement</td>
<td>GLBT Native Americans</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Launched in 2004, Downelink.com is a GLBT social networking site specifically tailored for and targeted to GLBT communities of color. Today, the site boasts over 600,000 users. In 2007, Logo Online Networks, a GLBT-centered division of MTV/Viacom enterprises, acquired Downelink. Then the site had 400,000 users. Of the users/members of Downelink, 72 percent are “African American, Asian or Latino/a, and the gender breakdown is balanced between men and women. The core audience of DowneLink.com users is young adults age 18-25” (Logo Communications 2007).

The history of the term “downe” has its roots in the African American GLBT community when the term “downlow” was used to describe African
American gay males who were not open about their sexuality. The Filipino and Asian-American GLBT community “reinvented” the word and it is now most commonly used to define “a male or female commonly of Asian descent who is out of the closet but not necessarily out and open. Most people classifying themselves as ‘downe’ tend to do so out of avoidance of family-related, religion-related, culture-related or society-related reasons” (Urban Dictionary. www.urbandictionary.com).

Downelink.com has a vibrant interface design and a large amount of features. The site uses the vlog feature to address issues within the community and features vlog hosts and series such as the popular, “Cherry Bomb”, that resonate highly with the young viewership. There are feature pages and areas for a multitude of subjects ranging from automobiles to technology. As with most social networking sites, Downelink offers the ability to create and share personal profiles, member pages, blogs and videos while also interacting with other members who share similar interests. Many of the features are available for viewing without actually becoming a member. Despite the range of features, Downelink is heavily utilized for its dating and lively chat room experience.

Among the GLBT community of color, African American lesbians are a noteworthy faction. There are a hundreds of sites and blogs dedicated to the interests of African American lesbians. Many are short-lived or underutilized and others remain an active and engaging resource for their users.

Blacklesbiansnetwork.com is a comprehensive site for information, topics, forums, advertising and networking specifically for black lesbians. This site
focuses on empowering the African American lesbian through writing and artistic expression. Postings are open to community members and there are blogs, videos and chat rooms, a virtual bookstore and clothing/apparel section. Writing articles is a popular activity on the site and members are free to post articles under five specific topic areas, ethnic and cultural issues, stereotypes, general issues, legal issues and erotica. Blacklesbiannetwork.com also hosts group forums. The most popularly visited forums are love and relationships, lesbian lifestyles, arts and literature and film.

Lesbianofcolor.blogspot.com is a lively and regularly updated blog that has a national reach. The topics include current events, travel destination reviews and advertisements, community volunteer programs, gay marriage and activism. The daily updates carry a common theme of empowerment and networking for support and community building.

Keith Boykin, author of keithBoykin.com, has become just as much a common name in mainstream media as it is in GLBT communities of color. However, Boykin has some early roots in the GLBT community of color's social media stage. He was one of the first openly black gay men to start and maintain a daily blog until 2007 when his career as a news correspondent, speaker and author began to flourish. Popular African American blogger, Jasmyne Cannick wrote of Boykin, “While Keith is ending his blog, his work and efforts will continue via other mediums. I am also encouraged that while Keith is moving out of the blogosphere, that in 2008 we will see an surge in not only African-American bloggers but more out Black same-gender loving bloggers who will share equally
important points of views” (www.jasymnecannick.com, December 31, 2007).

Boykin has served as Special Assistant to the President and Director of Specialty Media and was openly gay in his position there. His main website keithboykin.com, was formerly his blog and now hosts news reels, a bio and book information for the three he has authored in the last ten years. The site also has a link that leads to the online newspaper, The Daily Voice, of which Boykin is the editor, and is one of the most popular alternative news sites among African Americans in the GLBT community. Boykin’s site is well polished and contains streaming videos from his most recent on-air appearances, book launches and published articles.

Aboutwomyn.com and Break the Silence have a fundamental similarity. They are both blogs initiated as outlets for Asian and Indian lesbian communities, both of which are world-renowned for their cultural laws against homosexuality. The blogs are not maintained as often as the others mentioned in this section but offer great detail and insight into the specific concerns and issues that the community faces. The blogs have a global focus in order to offer users a broader historical and religious perspective of the issues that contribute to the lack of visibility of this segment in the western GLBT community.

Aboutwomyn.com covers topics relative to the Asian American lesbian community. The site features event coverage, book and music reviews.

Break the Silence is a blog specifically designed to bring about awareness of the discrimination and struggles of Indian lesbians across the world. The site gives insight into the historical and religious roots of the Indian anti-gay
movement and reports outreach and advancements in the acceptance of Indian lesbians in modern culture.

KenyonFarrow.com is a blog centered on news and views pertinent to GLBT people of color. Farrow is a career activist for GLBT rights and writes about his experiences being a black gay man in the United States as well as commentary on political events and news affecting the black gay community. The blog is very active and includes topics ranging from HIV and AIDS in the black gay male community to spotlighting noteworthy black lesbians for Women’s’ History Month.

Nativeout.org is a non-profit organization started in 2005. The site is dedicated to information, updates, blogs and new coverage of issues directly concerning GLBT persons of Native American heritage. It’s highly informative content often uses the term “Two-Spirited” which in Native American culture refers to GLBT people. One of the ongoing missions of Nativeout.org is to restore the role of two-spirited people to a place that was revered among Native American tribes. The site is colorful, engaging and actively updated. The most recent blogs and articles of interest are centered on an upcoming movie titled “Two Spirited” which features the life and experiences of a Native American male-to-female transgender.

An Analysis of the Trend Through The Spiral of Silence

The popularity of social media, due in part to the anonymity and self-directed disclosure it provides, ignites the GLBT person of color’s willingness to
speak out regardless of public opinion. This is counter to Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) original definition of the spiral of silence as a growing process where the minority group grows more silent as the majority group’s opinion gets stronger and more pervasive in the public sphere. The rise of social media has created new avenues for networking and open discourse in GLBT communities of color. Ho’s (2008) article confirms this by positing, “the reduced social cues and anonymity in the computer-mediated communication (CMC) may reduce status consciousness to encourage individuals who hold the minority opinions to speak out” (p. 203).

Blogs and sites such as downelink.com, lesbiansofcolor.blogspot.com and blacklesbiansnetwork.com lend support to Ho’s findings. Downelink’s feature of allowing the user to create profile pages enables some users to create a characterization of their true self if they are not willing to disclose their true identity. Aliases are commonly used by blog authors on all sites when responding to controversial issues thus allowing full opinion expression without full disclosure.

For example, Downelink’s religion forum posted a comment by a user calling herself “TruthMakesMeFree” stating that it is not possible for homosexuals to truly be Christians because it is not living the “true life of a Christian” (Downelink Religion forum, January 11, 2008). Her comment sparked a sharp response from another user with opposing views and a “hidden” profile picture charging the original poster with being like “almighty judgmental church leaders and members” (Downelink Religion forum, January 14, 2008). The safe
communication setting of the social networking site and the morally laden issue of homosexuality and Christianity opened a dialogue between two individuals who may never have had the opportunity to fully express their views in a face-to-face setting. This example poses an additional challenge to the original spiral of silence position that “voicing the opposite opinion incurs the danger of isolation” (44). The example also gives credence to Ho’s assertion that “the effect of fear of isolation should be dependent on the communication setting” (194).

Social media has also given GLBT activists and writers of color an accessible platform that is free and effective with a broad reach. Within the forum of social media these activists can place their issues on a global stage without anyone’s permission. Group members such as these are whom Noelle-Neumann (1984) calls “avant-gardes”. Bloggers such as Kenyon Farrow find a support system with the reference group of GLBT persons of color who view him as a representative. This is evidenced by the 19 response feeds to his biography posted on his blog, all of which gave him praise for his expository work covering the issues relevant to the GLBT of color community.

Likewise, avant-gardes in the GLBT of color community using social media as their forum can be found on the Nativeout.com, Break the Silence and aboutwomy.com sites, all of which are niche sites promoting awareness and activism for the specific GLBT issues relative to their groups.
V. Conclusion

This study has explored how social media is emerging as a prominent communication vehicle within the underrepresented and historically silent GLBT communities of color. As the theoretical focus of this paper, I have referenced the spiral of silence as the theory most closely aligned with the behaviors and attitudes of majority groups (mainstream America) and minority groups (GLBT community of color). I have connected how public opinion has shaped and rendered necessary the behavior of GLBT communities of color and explored the trends of social media usage within the community that indicate the empowerment and liberation of a once silent voice. Social media’s open platform and broad reach not only provides the GLBT of color community access to supporters, but also each other. They can exchange ideas, positions on arguments, reconnect with old friends, make new ones and even find love. All in a society where the gay lifestyle and, in some cases darker skin, is still not widely accepted.

This study has explored and reviewed the trend of social media within the GLBT of color community by actually visiting, interacting with and monitoring the usage of several sites. After reviewing the sites, it is clear that social media platforms specifically for this niche audience is a positive and supportive tool. Some of the most popular topics and forum discussions on GLBT of color-focused sites are unique to that niche and not found on the general GLBT sites. Within the of color heterosexual communities, the door remains closed to
discourse about GLBT issues whether for deeply religious or cultural reasons.
Yet, the GLBT of color community is nonetheless, a community. One with a voice that strives to be heard or, at the very least, acknowledged on the mainstream stage.

This study shows, in the cases of the more popular sites, that members are actively engaged and willing to share their individual viewpoints. Viewpoints are met with other viewpoints indicating lively discussion with users who share similar interests. Using social media, specifically social networking sites and blogs, GLBT persons of color are interacting with one another in ways never before experienced. This study unearths the reasons behind the social networking trends of a group that has been largely ignored in American mass media and culture. In addition, this study will help communication professionals to note the advantages of marketing to GLBT communities of color through the use of social media.

Homosexuality is a morally laden issue on a global scale. Within the GLBT community there is a need to project their perspectives in order to create understanding and support not only within their own community but across mainstream society as well. GLBT communities of color have an added imperative. By using social media, GLBT communities of color are able to reach mass audiences using their own authentic voice. The prevailing factor in the spiral of silence of the fear of isolation is greatly reduced in the communication setting of social media.
Future research on this topic could explore the reasons why so many social networking sites for GLBT persons of color are underdeveloped and obscure within search engines. As a community filled with talented spokespeople, writers and artists, research components of that undertaking would greatly benefit and diversify the GLBT community in the field of public discourse. Additionally, research can be explored around the cultural components of GLBT communities such as lesbians in India and Native American “two-spirited” groups. Such research would be congruent with Scheufele and Moy’s (2000) opinions that “a stronger emphasis [of the spiral of silence] on cross-cultural research has the potential to promote theory-building in this area” (p. 21). Finally, the spiral of silence theory attributes the formation of public opinion in large part to the influence of mass media. An exploration of how GLBT communities of color can effectively lobby for more serious and prominent positions on the mass media circuit leading them to be more recognizable in the public sphere would be beneficial to the field of communication theory.

In an age when current events are heralding the advancements of gay rights, the GLBT community of color should find the imperative to continue their activism through social media channels with the goal of promoting their unique issues across mass media. It is only then that global audiences will acknowledge their existence and promote advocacy as an issue of basic civil rights.
References

Literature Review


Additional References


