

The Politics of Silence: Political Self-Censorship, Gender, and Democratic Participation Among Young Citizens

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1. Abstract

The free expression of political opinion is considered foundational to democratic societies; it is commonly reflected through observable behaviour such as voting, protesting, campaigning and public discussion. However, young citizens increasingly choose to stay silent in public spaces including family conversations, friendships, university campuses and digital platforms. This phenomenon of political self censorship which represents a significant yet under-examined challenge to democratic participation. This study examines the socio-political and psychological, institutional and structural forces. Drawing on the spiral of silence theory and socio-psychological frameworks of self censorship this paper adopts a mixed method approach, combining a systematic literature review with a questionnaire based survey. This study investigates how fear of isolation, conflict, judgement, online backlash shapes political silence among young citizens. While also exploring how gender, political identity, ideological minority status shape whose voices are expressed or suppressed in democratic spaces. Particular attention is given to the role of the digital environment where polarization, echo chamber and online toxicity may encourage selective expression or silence. While self censorship can function as a strategy of self protection it also limits civic engagement, reduces viewpoint diversity and weakens democracy. By examining the cause of political silence, the research seeks to understand how self censorship shapes democratic participation among young citizens.

2. Introduction

Democracy depends on the free exchange of political ideas with political discussion, debates, voting, campaigning and protests. Yet increasingly, individuals avoid expressing their political opinions in online and offline spaces, a phenomenon known as self-censorship (Bar-Tal, 2017).

Political self-censorship shapes the voices that are heard, marginalized or excluded from public discourse. One influential explanation for this behavior is Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory, which argues that individuals continuously assess the climate of opinion around them and are less likely to express views they perceive to be unpopular because they fear social isolation or rejection (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Modern digital environments have intensified these.

Experiences of political silence are not distributed equally across society. Social identities and structural inequalities significantly shape citizens' willingness and ability to participate in political discourse. Women, young people, and ideological minorities often encounter barriers that discourage expression. While digital media has transformed how political opinions are formed, shared, and contested it has also increased exposure to public scrutiny, hostility and reputational risks.

Young citizens represent a significant group for examining political self-censorship because they are amongst the most active users of digital media and are increasingly involved in public discussions on social, cultural, and political issues. Their political expression is also shaped by other factors like family norms, educational institutions, peer network and online communities. Dotson's (2011) concept of epistemic violence explains how marginalized individuals engage in testimonial smothering by withholding their opinions when they believe their perspective will not be understood or taken seriously.

There remains a limited understanding of how these dynamics operate among young citizens in India. This study addresses these gaps by using a combination of a systematic literature review and a questionnaire-based survey to investigate how social, structural, and digital factors drive political silence among young citizens, demonstrating that it functions both as a strategy of self-protection and as a constraint on democratic participation. This

study argues that political silence is not a private preference but a socially conditioned and democratically consequential practice.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the research design, sampling procedure, data collection methods adopted to examine the factors influencing political self censorship among young citizens.

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a mixed method research design combining a thematic literature review with a questionnaire based survey.

The quantitative component used a structured questionnaire to examine patterns of political expression and platform specific engagement among the youth

The qualitative component consisted a thematic review of existing literature on political self censorship, political participation, gender, digital media, online political expression and democratic engagement. 31 relevant academic sources were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and analyzed thematically. The literature was reviewed to identify recurring concepts, theoretical perspectives and patterns. Similar findings were grouped together through thematic analysis, resulting in four analytical themes:

Gendered and Structural Constraints on Political Participation

Psychological Drivers of Political Silence and Self-Censorship

Digital Architectures, Echo Chambers and Online Toxicity

Strategic Silence: Fighting Back, Staying Safe and the "In-Between".

These themes provided the conceptual framework for interpreting the survey findings and comparing the existing scholarship with the experiences of young citizens.

3.2. Participants and Sampling Technique

The study targeted people aged 18 to 25 who are active users of digital media and enrolled in higher education. Participants represented diverse academic fields, including Humanities, Social Sciences, Sciences, Commerce and professional streams.

The study was not limited to one city or campus; instead we reached out to people through networks, friends and family. The goal was to get a group of participants and we ended up with 123 responses. Survey link were spread through personal channels, peer networks and online groups.

3.3. Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Data were collected using a questionnaire on Google Forms. To improve accessibility, the questionnaire was made available in English, Marathi and Hindi.

The questionnaire had three sections:

Section A: Collected demographics, such as age and gender.

Section B: Collected information about offline political expression, platform-specific risks and self-censorship behaviors.

Section C: Collected information by asking questions about personal experiences with online toxicity, campus speech norms, peer-group social sanctions and awareness of issues.

The data was collected online over a fixed period broadcasting the survey link through WhatsApp, email and social media.

3.4. Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis was conducted in two stages:

Quantitative Analysis: Survey responses were analyzed using frequencies and percentages for our survey data presenting it in tables and pie charts.

Qualitative Integration: Open ended responses were analyzed thematically integrating them into our discussion to test and validate our theoretical models.

This integration enabled the interpretation of qualitative findings within existing and empirical scholarship and informed the development of the Theory of Situational self preservation.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were maintained throughout the study since our study dealt with sensitive topics like politics, social anxiety and gender dynamics.

1. Informed Consent: Participants were informed the study's purpose and objectives requiring participants to confirm their consent before taking the survey.

2. Privacy: No personally identifiable information was collected and participants anonymity and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research.

3. Voluntary Participation: The respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could stop the survey at any time, without penalty.

4. Literature Review

Theme 1: Gendered and Structural Constraints on Political Participation

Political silence among youth stems primarily from systemic barriers rather than a general apathy toward civic engagement. A substantial body of literature indicates that particularly women, face restricted access to decision-making environments. Pervasive gender stereotypes undermine women's political engagement by reinforcing biases against their suitability for leadership, ultimately restricting their power and voice within the political sphere. For instance, Yilmaz (2025) argue that institutional environments remain

heavily dominated by men, which significantly suppresses the likelihood of women attaining leadership positions. Beyond gender, age operates as a distinct barrier to inclusion. As Tekindal (2017) argues that young peoples political views are frequently dismissed because they are perceived to lack knowledge, leaving youth feeling structurally devalued.

This systematic exclusion is deeply rooted in patriarchal societal dynamics. Khelghat-Doost and Sibly (2024) note that the cultural assumption of men political dominate causes women to perceive the political sphere as an inherently masculine environment, which deters them from pursuing institutional power. These gendered barriers are reinforced by broader structural constraints. Datta et al. (2024) argue that political systems often utilize opaque and confusing guidelines, limiting the public's ability to control or influence the public sphere.

Beyond institutional barriers, the threat of interpersonal conflict further deters political expression. Hansen (1997) establishes that a primary driver of political self-censorship is the anticipation of harsh public criticism. This dynamic is highly gendered; women face greater societal scrutiny and harsher judgment than their male counterparts. Although digital platforms are often presented as spaces for democratic participation, they have failed to alleviate these pressures. Powers et al. (2019) argue that online environments actively reinforce negative interactions, discouraging users to remain silent on controversial matters.

These hostile digital dynamics carry distinct consequences for female participants. As Höhmann et al. (2025) explain, women encounter severe, targeted online abuse that discourages them from entering politics both digitally and physically. Within many internet spaces, it has become socially acceptable to be dismissive and hostile toward political opinions, particularly those expressed by women. Expanding on these frameworks of patriarchy and gendered socialization, Heuer (2026) argues that public expression for women in India is explicitly restricted by institutionalized repression. The visible

ity of movements like #MeToo highlights how legal threats, gendered power imbalances, and toxic digital environments suppress female speech, proving that political silence is a product of structural barriers rather than a mere individual choice.

Theme 2: Psychological Drivers of Political Silence and Self-Censorship

The decision to remain politically silent is driven by an interaction between internal psychological anxieties and external social pressures. To avoid social isolation, individuals frequently employ self-censorship, withholding their political opinion to avoid criticism, judgement, or social exclusion. Bar-Tal (2017) argue that the fear of deviating from the dominating views of one's community acts as a primary psychological barrier to open expression. This aligns with Noelle-Neumann's (1974) "spiral of silence" theory, which argues that individuals monitor their social environments to determine acceptable opinions, choosing silence when they perceive their views to be in the minority.

This pattern also extends to digital spaces. Hoffmann and Lutz (2017) note that while online communication may reduce the fear of immediate physical retaliation, users remain concerned about digital ridicule. Consequently, as Porten-Cheé and Eilders (2015) observe, individuals carefully scan online opinion climates, self-censoring their input if the dominant digital atmosphere contradicts their personal beliefs.

The reason of this anxiety vary across social contexts. Weeks et al. (2017) demonstrate that individuals are influenced by the fear of negative reactions from family and friends. Rui and Cui (2022) note, individuals deliberately calculate their expressions to ensure they do not receive negative reaction.

Furthermore, institutional and previous experiences shape a person's long-term willingness to speak. Ford (2021) suggests that individual who have previously faced criticism are less likely to express political opinions. O'Bri

en and Kulibert (2018) found that students frequently suppress their political beliefs within educational institutions due to the fear of academic or peer criticism. For marginalized groups, this silence is further reinforced epistemic violence. Dotson (2011) defines this as "smothering" a phenomenon where minority speakers proactively silence themselves because they anticipate that dominant majorities will fail or refuse to accurately comprehend their perspectives.

Theme 3: Digital Architectures, Echo Chambers and Online Toxicity

The design of digital platforms plays an important role in how young voters perceive public opinion and navigate political communication. Rui and Cui (2022) observe that the interaction between offline identities with varying levels of online anonymity influence users to balance the benefits of political expression against the risk of backlash. This explains why majority of youth consume rather than participating actively while approximately 90% of young people consume online political content, only 35% actively post their perspectives. Platforms like Facebook, where real-name are visible, increase the perceived risk of public exposure. In contrast, encrypted applications like WhatsApp offer a higher sense of security, allowing users to share views with less fear of public exposure.

The design of digital platforms also encourage ideological isolation. Wright (2012) notes that algorithmic personalization creates of highly customized information feed referred to as "Daily Me" reinforces echo chambers, reduce exposure, and contribute to ideological polarization. When users encounter opposing political opinions. Weeks et al. (2023) find that when individuals realize their online contacts hold differing views, the fear of judgement increases, causing them to hesitate before posting, commenting, or liking political content. As a result this constant surveillance, students increasingly shift these conversations to offline environments where they can control their audience and avoid digital hostility.

Online toxicity further discourages political expression. Sinha and Mehta (2025) argue that the pervasiveness of trolling and targeted harassment created hostile environments, which encourages self-censorship. This dynamic is corroborated by Juncosa et al. (2026), who demonstrate that online toxicity discourages moderate voices, forcing them to entirely abandon public political conversations.

This silencing effect is intensely gender-based. As Kumar (2018) argues, targeted trolling and coordinated online attacks create a form of structural terror that drives women out of public digital spaces and into private networks to preserve personal safety. Debbarma (2025) concludes that while social media has technically expanded the opportunities for youth political engagement, the prevailing toxicity imposes severe social and psychological risks, severely undermining the willingness of young citizens to participate in public discourse.

Theme 4: Strategic Silence: Fighting Back, Staying Safe, and the "In-Between"

Contemporary political theory is increasingly shifting away from viewing silence as a passive sign of disengagement, instead as an intentional mechanism of safety and resistance. Khalid (2024) conceptualize silence as a strategy, highlighting "in-between" spaces where marginalized actors deliberately utilize self censorship to navigate structural barriers and maintain autonomy under oppressive conditions. In high-risk environments, this form of silence becomes essential for physical survival. For example, Sarac (2024) documents how Yazidi women strategically used silence and outward compliance to survive under ISIS rule, speaking publicly only after they reached the safety of refugee camps.

Strategic silence also functions as a collective strategy for protection against state and community surveillance. Dotson (2011) acknowledges that forced silence occurs when speaking out poses a direct threat to personal safety.

ty, Yuen and Lee (2025) illustrate how this behavior scales during periods of democratic backsliding. In changing political climates, family and friends encourage caution against discussing sensitive topics. Observing others remain silent also changes how individuals assess political risks, turning silence into a shared strategy for protection.

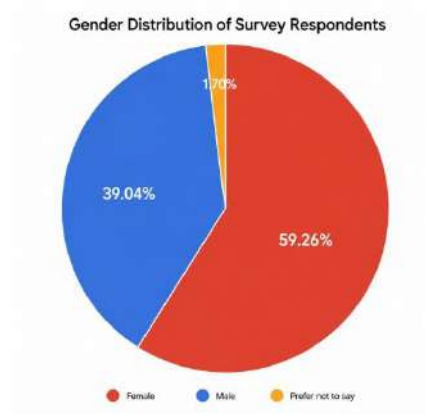
Furthermore, silence can also political resistance. Chatterjee (2024) demonstrates how Afghan women have utilized the burqa as a form of silent resistance against Taliban rule. Similarly, digital media startups and alternative communication networks provide spaces for marginalized groups to challenge state narratives. These platforms allow communities to document and resist institutional erasure such as historical state like the Gukurahundi genocide without exposing individuals to direct state retribution. By operating within these quiet digital and physical margins, young citizens can engage in political resistance while reducing risk of the surveillance of dominant power structures. Recognizing these perspectives of silence is therefore critical to understanding how youth manage power and personal safety in restrictive political landscapes.

5. Findings

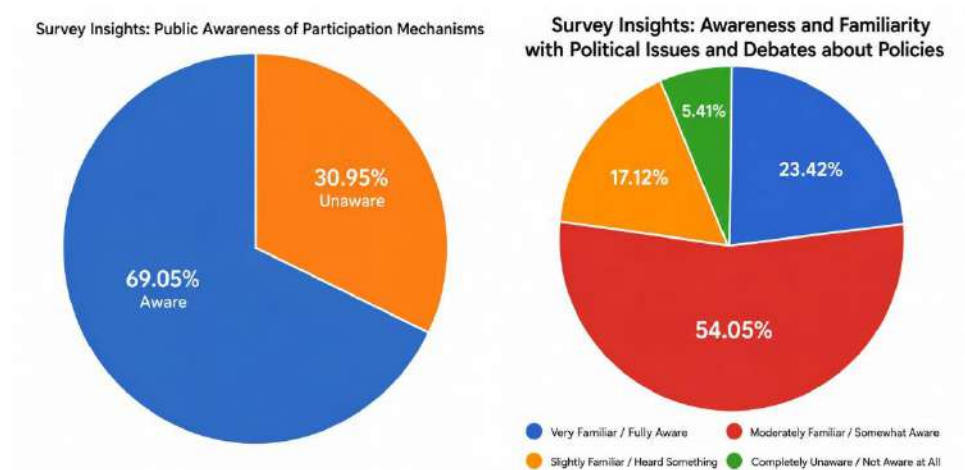
A total of 123 responses were received through English and Marathi version of the questionnaire circulated through Google forms. The survey examined political awareness, political self censorship, perception of online political environment and democratic participation among young citizens.

Demographic

profile

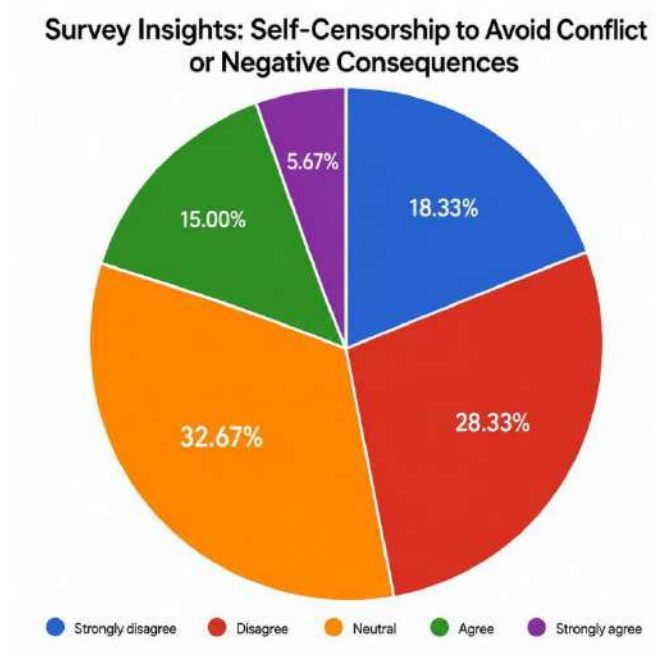


Political awareness and engagement



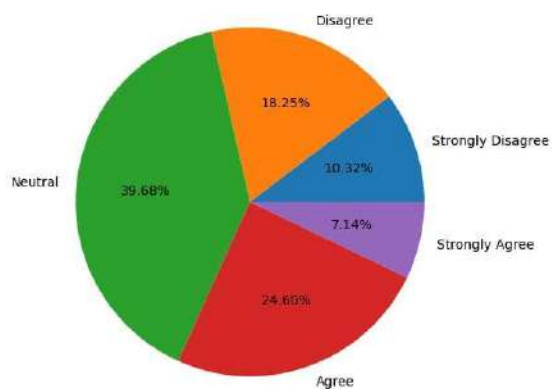
This indicates that political silence among respondents cannot be attributed solely to the lack of awareness since most participants reported awareness but a large proportion of respondents disagreed that the lack of political knowledge or interest is the primary reason for political silence.

Political self-censorship and strategic silence



A notable minority reported engaging in the behaviour of remaining silent to avoid conflict or negative consequence which reveals that self censorship exists in the sample.

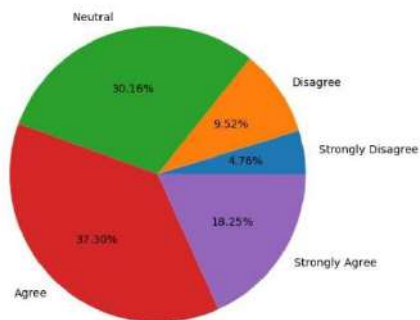
Survey Insights: Staying Quiet to Avoid Conflict in Toxic or Highly Divided Spaces



This suggests that political silence is a context dependent behaviour since staying quiet in toxic or highly divided spaces responses were divided across.

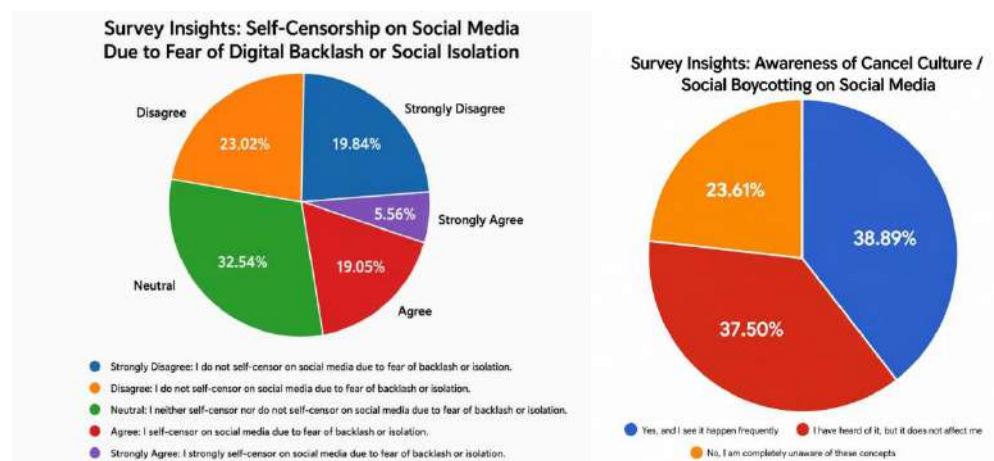
Online political environment and political expression

Do Online Political Discussions Become Too Toxic for Healthy Debate?



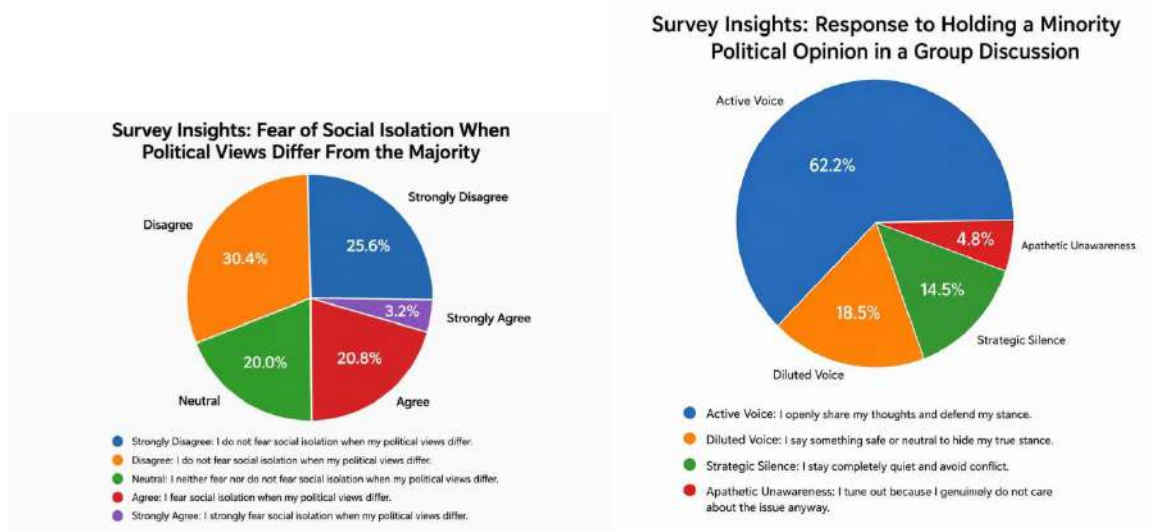
The clearest patterns observed what the perception of online political discussion, more than half respondents agreed that online political discussion frequently become too toxic for healthy debate.

This suggest that online political spaces is considered hostile or polarized which affects how individuals choose to participate.



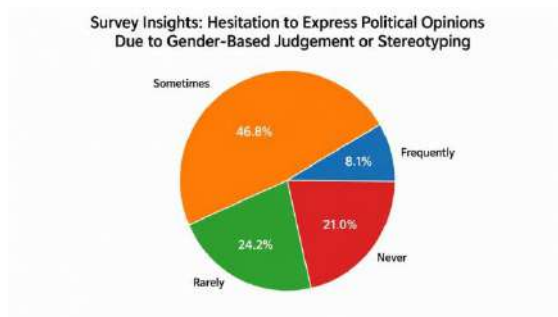
A majority of respondents did not self censor and the awareness of cancel culture or social boycotting on social media is widespread relatively. This suggests that respondents are familiar with the potential social consequences of political expression in digital environments.

Social pressure and political expression



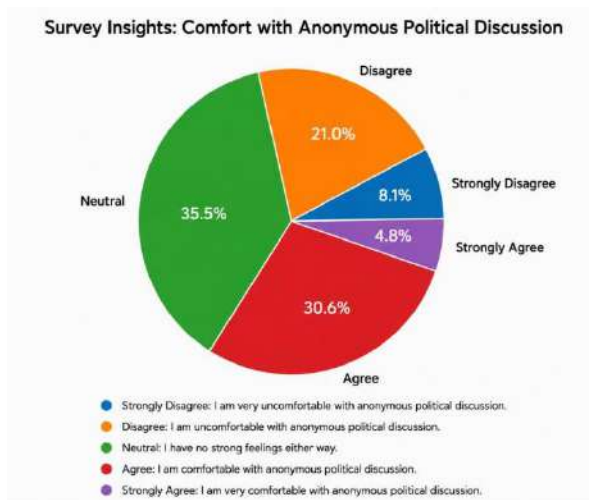
Most respondents did not report fear of social isolation and stated that they would openly defend a minority opinion.

Gender and political expression



More than half of respondent (54.9%) reported sometimes or frequently hesitating to express political opinion because of concerns regarding gender based judgement, stereotype or harassment.

Anonymous political discussion



Mixed views were expressed by the respondents here.

Neutral responses across survey items

A consistent pattern was noted across the survey, it was the neutral responses on several questions. This cannot be equated with political silence but it indicated uncertainty ambivalence or hesitation in expressing clear position on politically sensitive issues.

6. Discussion and Theoretical Framework

This section synthesizes the empirical findings from 123 survey respondents with established sociological, psychological, institutional, and digital communication frameworks. By examining how quantitative data patterns intersect with qualitative participant reflections, this study conceptualizes a new framework termed **"The Theory of Situational Self-Preservation."** Rather than viewing youth silence as a passive state of civic alienation or cognitive disengagement, this model reinterprets it as an active, calculated, and socially structured strategy for navigating adversarial communication environments.

In contemporary democratic theory, public vocalization is traditionally celebrated as the primary metric of a robust citizenry. However, these findings reveal that silence does not necessarily signal a failure of democratic

ngagement. Instead, it represents a sophisticated mechanism utilized by youth to establish boundaries and shield themselves from systemic harm. A foundational pillar of the Theory of Situational Self-Preservation is that young people continuously execute a risk-benefit calculus across shifting environments such as contrasting the vulnerability of the domestic sphere with the relative security of encrypted micro-spaces. Ultimately, the strategic choices made during these calculations directly shape their capacity to influence the future trajectory of democratic practice.

6.1. Challenging the Apathy Myth: High Exposure Yet Little Expression

Traditional political science frameworks often presume that when young people fail to speak out, it is because they lack civic interest, harbor apathetic dispositions, or are uninformed about public affairs. This conventional perspective relies on the assumption that public vocalization is a direct byproduct of political consciousness, leading to the conclusion that individuals who choose silence simply lack investment in the state. This study empirically challenges that assumption through both quantitative metrics and qualitative indicators.

Quantitatively, the data demonstrates high levels of civic literacy: 77.47% of surveyed participants stated they were somewhat or very familiar with current political issues and policy-oriented debates, while 69.05% demonstrated a structural understanding of public participation mechanisms. In open-ended responses, participants explicitly rejected the apathy narrative, noting that digital media ensures constant, unavoidable exposure to the political landscape through social media feeds, syndicated news clips, memes, and online discourse. As one respondent observed:

“With the advent of social media and technology, pretty sure everyone is well aware of what is happening in the world today. The major topics at least if not the minor ones. It’s just that no one truly wants to voice out their opinion because of what I stated earlier.”

This paradox highlights a critical gap in classical civic theories regarding youth participation. Today's youth possess unprecedented access to information, yet they face severe structural barriers to actual expression. This divergence aligns with the work of Tekindal (2017), who observed that young people are frequently marginalized within political environments not due to a lack of interest, but because older generations and dominant institutions systematically devalue their perspectives. When a young citizen is dismissed under the assumption that they lack sufficient expertise, their subsequent silence reflects an institutional failure to accommodate youth agency, rather than an absence of political comprehension.

Furthermore, digital exposure does not automatically translate into meaningful public engagement. As one participant noted, while this generation is exposed to vast amounts of information, "exposure doesn't always mean true understanding of the discourse." Social media platforms keep young people highly informed about global developments; however, the fragmented and highly polarized nature of digital information characterized by viral snippets, algorithmic echo chambers, and emotionally charged memes has transformed public political conversation from a cooperative exchange into a high-stakes liability.

This dynamic reinforces the findings of Sonny et al. (2026), who argue that algorithmic recommendations intensify network homophily, thereby escalating both ideological polarization and the social risks associated with expressing dissenting viewpoints. These dynamics also mirror the conclusions of Mir (2022), who noted that youth in India exhibit high levels of political awareness due to digital consumption but rarely express their opinions openly, adopting a strategy of deliberate avoidance.

The research further indicates that this silence is stratified by social privilege and immediate political context. One participant captured this nuance by stating:

"I can't make a clear judgment here. Some young people are truly unaware of the Indian political discourse, while others are informed. Those who are unaware often remain silent because of their privilege; it simply does not affect them. Additionally, there is a fear that friends, neighbors, or peers might cancel them out for holding different opinions, which can keep some people quiet. Among those who are aware, some choose to speak up and face boycotts or threats, while others remain silent due to fear of the consequences."

Consequently, youth communication behavior splits into two distinct categories: a privileged cohort that remains silent due to comfortable indifference, and a structurally vulnerable cohort that is silenced by the threat of violence, social isolation, or ostracization. This structural suppression aligns with Dotson's (2011) conceptualization of epistemic violence, where marginalized individuals are subjected to systemic silencing that limits their capacity to participate in public dialogue.

The primary catalyst for youth self-censorship is the steep social cost attached to political expression, a cost that extracts a toll across domestic, peer, and digital networks. While the home is ideally viewed as a safe environment for development, it is frequently the initial site of political suppression. One young adult explained this domestic tension, stating that "young people are intentionally silent because speaking up has historically come with too high a social cost. It also becomes difficult for them to express their opinions at home since the consequences are severe." To maintain domestic harmony, youth quickly learn to perform ideological compliance with their parents.

As they transition into universities and workplaces, the threat of parental discipline is replaced by the fear of social exclusion, fractured friendships, or professional repercussions. Another respondent detailed these sweeping risks:

“For some, the social cost of speaking out feels high. Sharing political opinions can lead to arguments, online harassment, damaged friendships, workplace issues, or being labeled unfairly. Because of this, many young people favor private conversations, anonymous expression, or low-key participation instead of openly debating.”

Classically, Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) spiral of silence theory suggests that individuals monitor the public opinion landscape and choose silence if they perceive themselves to be in the minority, driven by a fear of isolation. However, our empirical findings complicate this assumption. A significant 56% of respondents stated they did not fear standing alone due to differing opinions, and 62.2% asserted they would actively defend a minority viewpoint during a group discussion.

This indicates that contemporary youth possess internal confidence in their convictions, meaning their silence is not driven by a lack of resolve, but by a situational assessment of their immediate environment. As Hayes, Scheufele, and Huges (2006) observe, non-participation operates as a conscious, self-conscious choice within highly polarized climates. While young citizens may have the confidence to voice opinions among trusted peers, they purposefully disengage when a forum is hostile or prone to “canceling” behaviors. In a digitized society, losing a social connection is no longer a temporary interpersonal conflict; it carries the risk of a permanent digital label that can jeopardize future employment opportunities.

6.2. Gendered Hesitation and Epistemic Violence in Political Settings

A critical dimension of the survey data involves how gender identity intersects with and restricts political expression. Although the broader sample demonstrated a baseline willingness to defend minority views in general scenarios, this capacity becomes severely constrained when discussions turn specifically to gender-related political issues.

When asked if they hesitated to express political opinions on gender due to the fear of judgment, stereotyping, or harassment, the responses revealed a pervasive climate of caution:

- 46.8% reported that they sometimes hesitated.
- 24.2% reported that they occasionally hesitated.
- 8.1% reported that they often hesitated.
- 21.0% stated they never experienced hesitation.

Cumulatively, 54.9% of the total sample experiences structural hesitation when navigating gender-related political discourse.

These patterns strongly align with Dotson's (2011) framework of testimonial smothering, a form of epistemic violence where speakers proactively censor their own authentic viewpoints because they perceive that their audience will be hostile or structurally incapable of understanding the information. For these young citizens particularly women, who comprised 59.26% of the study sample public and digital arenas are often unsafe and unproductive, characterized by entrenched patriarchal structures and toxic online trolling. In these environments, female participants face the constant threat of having their perspectives devalued, dismissed, or essentialized based on gender stereotypes. Rather than being intimidated into submission, these individuals frequently deploy a non-reactive, strategic silence. This omission does not indicate an absent political identity or a refusal to engage in civic life; rather, it serves as a protective barrier against systemic exclusion. Because vocalization frequently invites toxic stereotyping, public degradation, or direct safety threats, silence becomes a rational mechanism for ensuring personal and psychological safety. Ahmed et al. (2026) expand upon this reality by framing these barriers as the institutionalized "cost of politics," demonstrating that political participation extracts distinct social and psychological costs from women and marginalized communities.

6.3. Theoretical Articulation: Situational Self-Preservation Theory

Connecting the participants' perceptions with existing literature illuminates the primary theoretical contribution of this work: the **Theory of Situational Self-Preservation**.

This theory posits that youth political expression is dictated by a continuous, calculated assessment of multidimensional risks. When confronted with a political topic, a young person does not merely ask, "What is my opinion?" Instead, their internal inquiry shifts to: "What structural context, social friction, or personal costs will come with voicing this opinion in this specific space?" If they conclude that the consequences of expression are too severe to endure, or that the risks of entering the discourse outweigh the utility of participation, they strategically choose to drop out. In this framework, silence operates as a vital protective mechanism shielding the individual from socio-professional detriment.

[Formation of political thought] → [Multi-layered risk assessment] → [Detection of high social cost] → [Engagement in self-preservation through silence]

The Theory of Situational Self-Preservation is built upon four core pillars established by the empirical data and digital communication literature:

1. Deliberate Withdrawal from Toxic Environments

Choosing silence is a rational act of self-preservation rather than a passive reaction to external stimuli. In this study, 55.55% of respondents noted that online political discussions frequently degenerate into environments too toxic for healthy discourse. This matches the findings of Juncosa et al. (2026), who demonstrate that the prevalence of toxic behaviors across digital networks silences open commentary and drives individuals—particularly those holding moderate viewpoints—offline to safeguard their mental and social well-being. Youth participants recognize that contemporary digital platforms algorithmically reward aggression while penalizing nuance, rendering structural disengagement the most logical choice for self-preservation.

A stark example of this dynamic appeared in contemporary Indian public discourse during the 2026 CBSE transcript controversy involving student whistleblower Vedant Shrivastav. When Shrivastav publicly challenged systemic inaccuracies in academic records, his critique was met with severe online backlash and immediate ideological labeling. This case mirrors Dotson's (2011) concept of testimonial smothering, as hostile public attention quickly shifted away from the institutional complaint to question the whistleblower's underlying motives. Concurrently, however, the strong digital support he received from peer networks, educators, journalists, and civil society demonstrates the dual nature of modern digital architectures, which possess the capacity to simultaneously silence and amplify marginalized voices.

2. The Shift to Anonymity and Private Counter-Publics

When young citizens retreat from the public square, they do not abandon political dialogue; instead, they shift the geography and modalities of their engagement. Reflecting this transition, 35.2% of survey respondents stated they felt significantly more comfortable expressing political beliefs when granted total anonymity, while another 35.5% maintained a neutral stance on the matter. These figures support the arguments of Rui and Cui (2022), who posit that the structural availability of online anonymity profoundly alters how individuals calculate social risk. Rather than engaging in public debate, young people employ public silence while migrating their active political involvement to private counter-publics such as encrypted group chats and anonymous forums to evade the ambient surveillance and professional repercussions associated with platforms like Facebook or LinkedIn.

3. Preserving Intellectual Independence

In a hyper-polarized digital society, individuals are constantly pressured to align with extreme, binary perspectives. To maintain their intellectual autonomy, several survey respondents noted that practicing public restraint is essential for fostering independent thought. One participant articulated this protective boundary:

"Freedom of speech is increasingly being taken from us, and most of the time, the younger generation is not necessarily wrong for doing so; however, there are some individuals who are doing so without critically analyzing the situation from various angles and different sides of an issue and therefore developing thoughtful/unique opinions on topics of interest."

For these young thinkers, refusing to participate in performative public discussions prevents them from being swept into shallow, polarized debates. In an era that demands immediate, absolute ideological alignment, strategic silence serves as a mechanism to protect intellectual depth and deliberate execution.

4. The Methodological Language of Neutrality

A pronounced empirical pattern emerged in the front-end data of the survey, characterized by a uniform chain of neutral values across nearly every item touching on politically sensitive themes. Specifically, a consistent 39.68% of total responses registered as "neutral" when asked about:

- Remaining quiet within toxic or deeply divided spaces.
- Whether a lack of knowledge or civic interest causes youth silence.
- Their personal comfort levels regarding anonymous discussions.
- Using self-censorship as a tactical tool to avoid interpersonal conflict.
- The fear of experiencing online backlash or social isolation.
- The generalized toxicity of modern online environments.

In traditional quantitative analysis, a heavy concentration of respondents selecting the middle neutral category is frequently dismissed as non-opinion, data noise, or respondent fatigue. However, when viewed through the lens of political self-censorship, this uniform neutrality yields vital diagnostic data. The "neutral" option functions as an empirical safe space a non-committed baseline that allows vulnerable youth to complete a politically sensitive questionnaire without exposing a definitive ideological stance.

This pattern does not reflect political ignorance. Rather, it represents an intentional indecision and a reluctance to publicly broadcast sensitive opinions. Neutrality is itself a form of self-censorship; it is an empirical tool for remaining visible yet unidentifiable.

6.4. Democratic Consequences: The Realist Micro-Polity

The systemic retreat of youth into private spheres introduces long-term challenges for the stability of democratic systems. When thoughtful, moderate, or vulnerable citizens are forced to suppress socially uncomfortable truths to avoid victimization, the public square is abandoned to aggressive factions. This distortion directly hinders social progress and obscures the underlying structural flaws of democratic institutions. As one participant warned:

"With an increasing rate of change in our world today, our policies and systems need to evolve and adapt much faster than they are currently able to do. More often than not, the voices of people being silenced are those that are sharing uncomfortable truths. These truths can often be difficult to hear and can challenge certain norms but, just because we choose to ignore uncomfortable truths, they will not go away. If people are afraid to express themselves openly and honestly, there will be far less clarity about what our future holds and it will be much more difficult to determine how to move forward."

This fear of public vocalization constricts viewpoint diversity, crippling the deliberative capacity of a democracy. When moderate citizens are structurally induced to conform or remain silent, the boundaries of public thought naturally narrow, eroding institutional trust.

Ultimately, these findings reframe our understanding of youth public discourse. The prevailing silence observed among young people today is not the product of an apathetic or uneducated citizenry; it is a rational, protective

defense mechanism against structural toxicity, cancel culture, gender-based harassment, and domestic pressures.

The causal mechanism mapping this dynamic operating within the contemporary public sphere begins with the structural conditions of the public square it self. Pervasive online toxicity, aggressive cancel culture, and entrenched institutional biases form a hostile communicative landscape. In response, young citizens initiate a realist risk assessment, weighing the immediate costs of political expression against the preservation of their personal and psychological safety. This calculation results in a dual approach to civic life: individuals deploy a strategy of public silence empirically masked by neutrality to secure a safe space, while simultaneously migrating their active engagement to hidden counter-publics and encrypted private environments . Through this careful spatial management, youth manage to protect their intellectual independence, proving that strategic withdrawal can serve as a vehicle for preserving agency rather than a total retreat from political consciousness.

Through the lens of the Theory of Situational Self-Preservation, this study demonstrates that youth have not abandoned democratic ideals. They remain highly informed, highly literate actors who protect their personal security and reputations by carefully managing their communication environments during an era of acute social anxiety. While they may choose invisibility in hostile public arenas, they actively preserve their critical thinking, diverse perspectives, and uncomfortable truths within less visible, private settings.

This behavior strongly mirrors the political paradigm of realism. While classic realism assumes that states act primarily to maximize security and survive within a hostile, anarchic international system, young citizens employ an identical logic to navigate modern public spaces. Rather than approaching political expression as an inherent democratic obligation, respondents treat it as a high-stakes strategic calculation. Youth self-censorship repres

ents a realist micro-polity: a calculated response to an environment perceived as fundamentally threatening to individual security.

6.5. Practical Implications and Democratic Interventions

Defending democratic deliberation requires institutional frameworks that minimize the social cost of youth participation. International precedents demonstrate that these communication barriers are not immutable. Ireland's Citizens' Assembly provides an effective institutional model, demonstrating how structured, respectful, and moderated dialogue can facilitate civic engagement on highly contentious socio-political issues. By gathering citizens into spaces shielded from immediate external hostility, this model successfully reduces the fear of social sanction and encourages diverse participation. Implementing similar, localized models could prove invaluable for restoring youth confidence in public deliberation.

Concurrently, the digital sphere requires alternative support structures to counter online harassment. As highlighted by the 2026 CBSE transcript controversy, the presence of supportive digital networks was instrumental in shielding student Vedant Shrivastav from total isolation. These counter-networks not only mitigated the psychological toll of public exposure but also sustained vital public attention on institutional accountability. Fostering these collaborative, protective spaces within digital architectures remains a critical prerequisite for lowering the personal costs of civic expression and preserving youth agency in modern democracy.

7. Limitations of the Study

While this study offers critical empirical and conceptual insights into contemporary youth political expression and establishes a foundation for the Theory of Situational Self-Preservation, several methodological and contextual limitations must be acknowledged. Explicitly recognizing these analytical

l boundaries ensures a transparent assessment of the empirical findings and provides essential direction for future scholarship in political communication and civic participation.

7.1. Sample Size and Geographic Scope

The empirical dataset underpinning this research is drawn from 123 survey respondents. While this cohort yielded rich, highly detailed qualitative insights, the relatively modest sample size inherently limits the statistical generalizability of the findings to the broader global youth population. Furthermore, institutional frameworks, state surveillance apparatuses, and cultural norms regarding public speech vary dramatically across international borders. Consequently, the distinct strategic configurations of situational self-preservation identified among these participants may manifest differently or be driven by entirely alternate structural catalysts when applied to disparate geopolitical landscapes.

7.2. Imbalanced Demographic Gender Composition

The demographic composition of the study's sample is significantly skewed toward individuals identifying as female, who represent 59.26% of the total participants. Although this concentration provides a robust empirical foundation for examining gendered hesitation and epistemic violence, it introduces a potential confounding variable into the baseline risk assessments documented across the wider sample. Because women face a disproportionate volume of targeted online hostility and patriarchal surveillance, this demographic imbalance may artificially elevate the aggregate data trends. A more evenly distributed sampling design might yield lower baseline percentages for metrics tracking the fear of isolation, conflict avoidance, and strategic neutrality when evaluated across the entire cohort.

7.3. Socio-Economic Privilege and the Digital Divide

A distinct selection bias arises from the study's reliance on digitally mediated youth who possess regular internet access, hardware availability, and the technological literacy required to complete an online-administered survey instrument. Consequently, the research systematically excludes youth from lower socio-economic strata, remote rural communities, and structurally disenfranchised populations who are cut off by systemic digital divides. By capturing the experiences of a technologically privileged cohort, the study potentially underrepresents individuals whose political silence is dictated by severe material disenfranchisement, rather than the digital toxicity, algorithmic polarization, or peer-driven cancel culture that dominates online spaces.

7.4. Self-Report Bias and Coded Neutrality

The reliance on self-reported survey data introduces the classic vulnerability of social desirability bias, where participants answer based on idealized perceptions of their behavior rather than their actual real-world actions. For example, while 62.2% of respondents asserted that they would actively defend a minority viewpoint in a group setting, their behavioral choices within a high-stakes, toxic environment might lean significantly closer to complete self-censorship.

This analytical challenge is further complicated by the high concentration of neutral responses, which consistently hovered between 30% and 40% across sensitive metrics. While this study conceptually decodes this phenomenon as empirical evidence of a defensive "safe zone" or masked hesitation, establishing the precise boundary between intentional, strategic neutrality and genuine participant indifference or structural ambiguity remains a persistent methodological challenge.

7.5. Structural Conceptualization of Digital Architectures

Finally, the survey instruments deployed in this research largely treated online political spaces and social media networks as a single, homogeneous environment. In reality, the contemporary digital ecosystem is highly fragmented, and a user's risk calculation shifts fundamentally depending on specific platform affordances. Navigating public, algorithmically driven spaces like X/Twitter or Instagram involves vastly different social threats than interacting within semi-private, ephemeral networks like Snapchat, or encrypted, closed spaces like WhatsApp and Signal groups. Because the survey did not deeply disaggregate these digital environments, the current findings cannot fully isolate how specific architectural features trigger, mitigate, or alter the strategies youth use to protect themselves in everyday situations.

8. Conclusion

This study evaluated the dynamics of political self-censorship among young citizens by examining the complex intersections between political awareness, social pressure, digital environments, and democratic participation. The empirical findings directly challenge the conventional assumption that youth silence in the public square is primarily a consequence of civic apathy or intellectual ignorance. Instead, the data demonstrates that while the majority of young respondents remain highly informed about contemporary political issues, they make a deliberate, conscious choice to withhold their expressions from the public sphere.

This research establishes that political expression is profoundly shaped by the immediate social and institutional environments in which young people operate. The decision to enter or withdraw from public discourse is dictated by acute anxieties surrounding interpersonal conflict, online toxicity, digital backlash, social judgment, domestic pressures, and gender-based harassment. While a segment of the cohort demonstrated the internal confidence ne

cessary to defend minority perspectives in abstract terms, they remained highly selective about the specific contexts in which they chose to vocalize these beliefs. This calculated behavior indicates that contemporary youth silence is fundamentally strategic, reflecting a realist approach to self-preservation where individual security takes precedence over civic ideals.

Furthermore, this study highlights the contradictory role that digital media architectures play in shaping modern political participation. Although digital platforms have successfully democratized access to political information, they have simultaneously cultivated polarized, hostile communication environments that systematically discourage healthy, nuanced public deliberation. Faced with pervasive online hostility, young citizens increasingly adapt by seeking refuge in anonymous digital spaces or migrating their active political communication to private, closed-network counter-publics where the perceived social and professional risks are significantly minimized.

Synthesizing these qualitative and quantitative data points, this study introduces the Theory of Situational Self-Preservation to explain how individual choices regarding political expression are mediated by a continuous calculation of social, emotional, and structural costs. Within this theoretical framework, silence is reconceptualized as a dynamic, protective strategy employed by youth to balance potential relational risks against the rewards of participation. Ultimately, this study concludes that today's youth are not politically disconnected from democratic life; rather, they are highly informed actors who must constantly negotiate the hazardous costs of public expression. These findings highlight a critical institutional need to reform digital architectures and establish safer, more inclusive, and genuinely deliberative spaces for democratic engagement.

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