Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations
vol. 26, no. 2 (62) / July 2024, **57-75**
ISSN: 1454-8100/ E-ISSN: 2344-5440

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What causes reticence in publicly correcting false information online? A case study from the Philippines

Abstract

News audiences on social media succumb to filtering systems to navigate the overabundance of information. However, filtering systems get bolstered by echo chambers, increasing social media polarization, especially when false information hinders better-informed viewpoints. *Reticence,* though understudied, has the ability to hamper the spread of factual information. Hence, this study aims to investigate why social media users showcase reticence toward publicly correcting false information on their feeds, and how this disposition can affect ideological polarization. Eight interviews were conducted through criterion-based and referral sampling methods, and the resulting transcripts were analyzed through a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. Findings showed that reticence is driven by three interrelated factors: *relational, proximal,* and *cognitive and emotional*. This study contributes to the almost-forgotten research theme of reticence in communication and journalism studies, showing why such behavior and its considerations inadvertently contribute to polarization on social media.

Keywords: reticence, echo chambers, false information, social media polarization, Philippines

Introduction

Online news audiences use filtering systems to tailor information on the Internet, which has blown up over the past three decades (Beam & Kosicki, 2014). Filtering systems also get aligned with the preferences of news audiences. However, these systems may thrust news audiences into echo chambers where viewpoints are limited. As a result, filtering systems are often blamed (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017; Aida et al., 2020) for the prevalence of polarization. Ideological polarization, by operational definition, is the division among individuals based on their set of beliefs, which influences how they consume news and form their

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stances. This restriction encourages biased interaction and a propensity for uncritical discussion online that follows polarized opinions (Zimmer et al., 2019). Hence, the thriving of fake news stems from active collaboration among deeply polarized users (Zimmer et al., 2019).

Misinformation is more likely to spread among homogenous cohorts (Narayanan et al., 2018) and thrives depending on how echo chambers are operationalized (Zimmer et al., 2019). However, little is still known about another mediating factor—*reticence*—in publicly correcting false information online (Gurgun et al., 2022) and how it could affect ideological polarization. Present in these polarized spaces are reticent communicators who do not publicly express their thoughts on false information. Consequently, passivity could hamper the spread of information (Romero et al., 2011), which could engender social media polarization (SMP), as inaction is not always a sign of a lack of agency (Casemajor et al., 2015; Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017). That being said, reticence towards publicly correcting false information may keep news audiences polarized because of unchallenged beliefs and inclination for reaffirming and erroneous information in their echo chambers.

In a sense, the paper of Casemajor and collaborators (2015) illustrated a concept that almost resembles reticence: *non-participation* in overall digital media. However, reticence remains underexplored in the context of online news, news audiences' participation, and the circulation of false information in echo chambers. This research mainly aims to ascertain why social media users receiving false information experience reticence and investigate the following:

1. What considerations surround the reticence of social media news audiences given their differing views on politics and political news?

2. What are the indicators of social media audiences' reticence toward politics and political news, based on their underlying reasons?

This study may provide future researchers a groundwork for exploring reticence rather than simply framing it as shyness (Keaten et al., 1997). This research also contributes to journalism by providing a better understanding of modern-day news audiences and their consumption and engagement patterns, allowing journalists and readers alike to better navigate the news environment.

Literature and theoretical framework

Reticence

Gerald Phillips introduced the term "reticence" to the field of communication in 1965 (Keaten et al., 1997). Philipps linked reticence to fear of public speaking and, later, inadequate communication skills. Building on a synthesis of seminal studies on reticence by Phillips (spanning 1968, 1977, 1984, 1986, and 1991), as analyzed by Keaten and collaborators (2000), cognitive elements—a strong adherence to a set of beliefs on dialogue—effectuate reticence then form difficulties in communication. The belief that the loss would be greater than the gain is generally why individuals avoid communication altogether. In 2000, Keaten and Kelly redefined reticence as the behavior "when people avoid communication because they believe it is better to remain silent than to risk appearing foolish" (p. 168).

According to Keaten and collaborators (2000), reticent people may feel that *quid pro quo* is not necessary as they perceive themselves to be effective as mere listeners . Alternatively, building on a 1996 paper of Kelly and collaborators, the authors note that reticent people may

behave in ways aimed at minimizing mistakes (Keaten et al., 2000).. According to Phillips (1984, 1986, 1991), others believe that they do not have the "gift" of communicating effectively (Keaten et al., 2000; Gurgun et al. 2022). To better understand the reasons behind reticence, Keaten and collaborators (2000) proposed a six-component model. The first component is *need*, wherein reticent communicators know the importance of communication in society. Secondly, they see themselves as *less competent* in key communication skills. Thirdly, they *feel helpless* toward controlling the outcomes because they believe failure is inevitable. Fourthly, reticent people experience *anxiety* of failing in situations where conversing is needed. The fifth component is *devaluation,* wherein they experience a paradox of devaluating the importance of communication on a personal level, despite agreeing that communication is valuable. Lastly, *withdrawal* occurs when they avoid communicating.

While active engagement is commonly used to measure the propagation and reach of a post, non-engagement could also determine its trajectory. Romero and collaborators (2011) found that the correlation between a source's popularity and its influence is weaker than expected. In addition, reticence is crucial in determining which topics dominate public opinion. On social media, followers and engagements measure the reach of a topic. Reticence, however, can also be a yardstick because it hinders the reach of information in a system that needs active engagement from audiences for news to propagate, thus reinforcing SMP.

Previous research concluded that lack of online participation is primarily disadvantageous, particularly political participation (Xenos et al., 2014; Boulianne, 2015). Yet not all forms of active participation accurately indicate users' agency and intent (Morozov, 2011; Fuchs, 2014; Yi, 2020). Inaction does not necessarily indicate a lack of agency (Casemajor et al., 2015) nor a negative response. It only becomes problematic when it prevents people from achieving their desired ends (Keaten & Kelly, 2000) and when people are being placed in situations where they are intentionally being silenced by another (Yi, 2020).

Social media polarization

This study on reticence online operates in a milieu of continued social media polarization (SMP). Researchers define SMP, based on its operational definition (Winne, 2022), as polarization caused by users' overexposure on social media, where they consume news and engage in discussions influenced by bias.. This inclination towards like-minded news might push them toward groups reaffirming these biases, which researchers think can manifest reticence.

Social media tools have been studied to understand their impact on polarization and news consumption. Algorithms of a modifiable social networking site change homophilous patterns in network structure and biases toward like-minded news (Cinelli, et al., 2021), and suppress alternative viewpoints (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017). These tools, including social media, have also generated echo chambers, an environment where only information and opinions that reinforce one's beliefs are welcomed. Political engagement, supposedly informative and harmless, was linked with social media use and may deepen polarization (Lee et al., 2017).

However, while algorithms are unavoidable, some think it may be incorrect to pin the blame for polarization solely on the medium or source. It is still up to how the user examines and responds to the information they encounter (Zimmer et al., 2019). Yet even if user control can mediate algorithm curation, the hazards of polarization are still present.

The threat of polarization seems to be felt inside echo chambers where users become more vulnerable to false information. DiFranzo and Gloria-Garcia (2017, p. 6) emphasized that

echo chambers magnify the chances of "confusion about causation, and thus encourage speculation, rumors, and mistrust". They added that fake news would most likely dwell within one circle, leaving little-to-no effect on outsiders. This could strengthen polarized views among communities exposed to fake news, having *affirmative* information to back their beliefs. Furthermore, SMP threatens democracy over time (Spohr, 2017) if information is selected poorly and propagated imprudently. It can then become a causal pathway to extreme ideology (Prasetya & Murata, 2020) and repulsion.

On the contrary, several studies have found that polarization is not present among online news audiences because sources were found to have diverse audiences. Kitchens and collaborators (2020) said there is no evidence that information sources are limited because of social media use. Fletcher and colleagues (2019) noted that the extent of polarized news patterns, algorithmic filter bubbles, and echo chambers may be overestimated. Instead, the changing media landscape is both a driver and propagator of the ossification (or formation) of polarization (Campante & Hojman, 2013).

Information behavior and its cultural nuances

This concept involves users' news consumption patterns on social media, the cognitive processes they undergo when selecting content, and their reaction to information. The assemblage, rearrangement, and assimilation of ideas shape people's responses to the world because they rely heavily on contextualized information (Lippmann, 1922). This process is not void of biases and personal prejudices, whether unintentionally or intentionally gained.

The human mind is one inherent filter, subconsciously and subjectively refining information. Case-building, innately occurring at a subliminal level, works as a defense mechanism to maintain consistency in thought, practice, and belief (Spohr, 2017). Since discomfort unsettles people, they tend to avoid information they subconsciously classify as false, regardless of its actual truth. This is better explained by the interplay of psychological and sociological factors that influence the formation of polarization: individual biases, deep-seated cultural prejudices, attachment of identity to social groups, inclination to consistency, self-censorship, etc. (Qureshi et al., 2021).

The above being said, culture is also a facet of users' information behavior, which may help explain their reticence. Here we account for Filipino culture as an example. Filipino communities maintain harmony through mechanisms such as hierarchical arrangements based on seniority, a pattern that is deeply rooted in families, the smallest social unit. (Mulder, 1994). This is primarily founded on relative inequality based on age (Mulder, 1994). Regarding this social stratum, people ought to approach relationships—especially ones with elders—with respect and good manners (Mulder, 1994). Not fulfilling these moral obligations causes discomfort or shame, as disrespect would be viewed as a breach of established order (Mulder, 1994). Relatedly, *pakikisama* (comradeship) is where one is bent on pleasing their *kapwa* or the group they belong to. This comes from their utmost regard for the group, even at the expense of one's own interests or needs (Bautista, 1999; Nadal, 2021 as cited in Chan & Litam, 2021). Studies have shown that the desire to maintain relationships plays a significant role in withholding interpersonal feedback or hesitating to counteract misinformation, especially if it is perceived to cause potential harm or offense to the other person (Gurgun et al., 2022).

These moralistic worldviews and collectivist notions interplay with other cultural components like *amor propio* (Chan & Litam, 2021). Considerations of being shamed and *amor propio* are embedded among Filipinos: Gong and coauthors (2003), as cited in Chan and Litam (2021), note that these are related to the East Asian notions of saving face. Shame or *hiya* is associated with fear of losing face, while *amor propio* is linked with self-esteem and the desire to maintain social acceptance (Chan & Litam,2021). They explained that to experience *amor propio* would make a Filipino a subject of gossip, which is considered shameful. Gurgun and collaborators (2022) explained that people monitor and manage their self-presentation in social environments to create positive impressions in the eyes of others, even to the extent of avoiding controversial topics. Furthermore, the more a culture sees corrective action as deviation from what is socially desirable or normative, the less motivated people are to challenge and correct false information online.

Information behavior comes with its social-scale consequences on individuals. About 61% of millennials from the US get their news from Facebook (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017). This impacts their political self-expression, attitudes, actions, information-seeking practices, and voting behavior (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017). Propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation inflame echo chambers and impact behavior, making room for more social ills (Qureshi et al., 2021). Put simply, information behavior influences people's interactions with society and vice versa.

Homophily and partisan source affiliation

Other possible factors emerge in the display of reticence online. One possible factor is homophily, or the human tendency to jump into circles with the same perspectives and opinions (Gillani et al., 2018), therefore localizing information transmission (McPherson et al., 2001). This phenomenon is evident on social networks, even amplifying echo chambers that trample on the quality and diversity of discourse (Gillani et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021). These *closed spaces* are often subliminally formed through similarities in background (e.g., age, race, educational attainment). Homophily also transpires offline and extends to other personal relationships (McPherson et al., 2001). News sharers account for characteristics that may not be fixed, apparent, or defined by distinct social categories (e.g., political dispositions, socioeconomic status, personalities, or interests) (Kim & Ihm, 2020).

In connection with homophily, the partisan source affiliation of online users can induce reticence. Such affiliation happens when news audiences get information from sources with the same ideological leaning as theirs. Kim and Ihm (2020) found that news showing a personal similarity with the audience is more likely to be shared by users on symmetrical social media (individuals' social distance is mutually equivalent [Paul & Friginal, 2019]) than on asymmetrical. The latter operates on the assumption that audiences do not have personal feelings for them due to the difficulty in assessment and management. Gillani and colleagues (2018) support this observation, saying that affective polarization (individuals' evident, strong negative emotions toward another) taints civic discourse as it allows the sidestepping of the rational exchange of ideas.

Media portrayal of subjects can induce an emotion (like or dislike) that readers can project toward the subject (Wu & Shen 2020), especially on issues with high politicization and for audiences with political leaning. Gillani and collaborators (2018) found that highly politicized issues and concerns tend to strengthen polarities and group identities, with interest in

politics being a determinant of polarization (Melki & Sekeris, 2019). Affiliation with certain sources affirms the stance of news audiences and, consequently, divides them further.

Online polarization as the 'habitat' of reticence

Communities where fake news burgeons and echo chambers border them exist (Zimmer et al., 2019). Delimiting the spread of information provides opportunities for ideological polarization to occur (primarily when public opinion is classified into drastically opposing viewpoints). Often, ideological polarization emerges in homophilous communities where negative views are being quashed (Aida et al., 2020) and false information can thrive.

The prevalence of polarization and echo chambers, which sidelines challenging viewpoints (Aida et al., 2020) and drives false information to circulate (Narayanan et al., 2018), could be attributed to algorithms (DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017; Aida et al., 2020), online information behavior like homophily (McPherson et al., 2001), or status (Kim & Ihm, 2020) and affirmation from personal leanings (Messing & Westwood 2012; DiFranzo & Gloria-Garcia, 2017).

Researchers believe, though, that *passiveness* (a concept almost synonymous with reticence) can buttress SMP and hinder the reach of information. Echo chambers and homophilous communities also become the habitat for reticence to thrive. In the case of the spread of false information, reticence in correcting these falsehoods can hamper the spread of factual information (Romero et al., 2011). Reticence may also be a free ticket for "false" information to circulate. Hence, researchers think the underexplored variable of reticence becomes worth studying given observations that some news audiences showcase difficulties in rectifying false information in echo chambers and homophilous online communities. What may also be necessary is to understand the causes of reticence and how this behavior may affect ideological polarization.

Theoretical framework

There is an inadequacy in exploring the adverse outcomes created by communities bordered by echo chambers (Qureshi et al., 2020). Causes and consequences of SMP may be better grasped through two theoretical anchors: the Muted Group Theory and the Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

Cultural anthropologist Edwin Ardener and feminist researcher Shirley Ardener developed the Muted Group Theory (in Meares et al., 2004). This communication theory states that there is an inequality in language wherein people from marginalized cohorts are unable to express themselves, silenced by dominant groups that somewhat have greater control over language. The dynamics between subdominant and dominant groups underscore unequal participation, wherein muted groups respond by remaining engaged or resorting to reticence and apathy (Meares et al., 2004; Barkman, 2018). This may cause the mislaying or perversion of information that could strengthen polarization in the long run (Qureshi et al., 2020).

For its part, Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance theory holds that people are more inclined to accept reaffirming information because it conveys positive emotions (Qureshi et al., 2020). People naturally seek consistent information (Spohr, 2017); reticence to correct false information may stem from dissonance, driven by the human tendency to seek information that aligns with preexisting beliefs.. This leads to persistent polarized behavior (Qureshi et al., 2020).

The above theories being said, social media polarization has seen some news audiences become reticent, allowing themselves to be muted by dominant parties in echo chambers and homophilous communities, and accepting the false information as a form of cognitive dissonance (even if inadvertent). These theoretical lenses may be starting points for understanding the dynamics of reticence in the universe of social media polarization and fake news propagation.

Methods and design

This study investigated why some users become reticent to publicly correct false information in their echo chambers. Researchers here employed a qualitative study design, which "investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, as cited in Farquhar, 2012, p. 3). Given the nature of reticence (i.e., staying reserved and not interacting), this behavior could be better analyzed based on users' reasoning, perspectives, lived experiences, and the possible outcomes (or lack thereof) when refusing to rectify false information publicly.

Research participants were social media users from Metro Manila (the capital region of the Philippines), who were likely frequent users of social media. Through criterion and referral sampling, participants were eligible to participate if: a) they limit news sources on social media primarily to those whom/which share the same beliefs, opinions, and ideologies as theirs; and b) they encounter false information on their feed from any source and do not correct them in public (e.g., comment section). The researchers interviewed eight Filipino social media users (initially there were nine participants, one of which belonged to the older age group, but her interview answers revealed later on that she did not qualify for the second criterion.). All respondents were aged 18-to-26 years old (six of them are female). All eight participants own Facebook and Instagram accounts, but six of them primarily use Facebook for browsing news [*see Table 1*].

Table 1. Demographic and social media profiles of respondents

Age	**Males (N)**	**Females (N)**	**Total**
18-26	2	6	8
Social media platform	**Platforms used (N)**	**Platforms most used for browsing news (N)**	
Facebook	8	6	
Twitter	7	1	
YouTube	6	0	
Instagram	8	0	
TikTok	5	1	

Source: Robotfoto or demographic profile sheets

Researchers employed a two-part questionnaire, first using a *robotfoto* that asked respondents' demographic and social media profiles. Afterwards, the actual key informant interviews (KIIs) were done while using an *aide memoire* (interview guide). *Aide memoire* questions are based on the related literature, including Keaten and Kelly's (2000) six-component model.

Given that this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (January 2021 to February 2022), participants were recruited online through a posted publication material (*pubmat*) that carried a Google Form link. The Google Meet video conferencing app was used in the KIIs, which averaged about 45 minutes. Researchers secured research ethics clearance from a Philippine journalism school's institutional review board (with approval number JRNERC-202122-47). The *pubmat* contained participant information sheets and informed consent forms, which all participants signed before being interviewed. Respondents' identities were assigned codes (e.g., P1, P2). Researchers transcribed these interviews themselves, as these transcripts and video recordings were kept and encrypted in the data storage website Figshare.

Researchers combined inductive and deductive thematic analyses (TA) to code and thematize interview answers and interpret respondents' patterns of thought (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Since reticence emerged as unstudied in journalism studies, inductive TA allowed more flexibility by analyzing themes that occurred in the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Deductive TA then guided researchers' analysis of interview answers with aid from the related literature, particularly *a priori codes* derived from the six-component model of Keaten and Kelly (2000). Arranged data from transcripts alongside observational field notes were analyzed and corroborated before distinguishing constructs and deriving solid conclusions. Through this approach, retracing concepts learned, forming new ones, and defining relationships among categories became possible (Suter, 2012). Researchers validated the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interview transcripts using the critical friend technique.

Findings

Major considerations for reticent dispositions

The breadth of respondents' interview answers yielded three major themes—*considerations*—to explain their reticence when false information is shared in groups. These themes (see Table 2) are the following: (1) *Relational considerations* in which reticent users regard family and kinship dynamics; (2) *Proximal considerations* or the level of association between the reticent user and the views depicted in false information; and (3) *Cognitive and Emotional considerations* which refer to the participants impressions of the source of false information, and emotions toward false information and publicly correcting them. These main considerations indicate avoidance of being called out where others may give critical attention to a person's intolerable acts or mistakes; avoidance of conflict where the clash of different standpoints causes argument; avoidance of cutting ties or putting an end to relationships.

Table 2. Considerations for reticence and its indications

Reasons for being reticent		Indications of reticence		
Themes	**Manifestations**	**Avoidance of call out**	**Avoidance of conflict**	**Avoidance of cutting ties**
Relational Considerations	Closeness in relationship Familial ties Respect for elders	✓	✓	✓
Proximal Considerations	Divergent views Preferred topic Preferred medium		✓	✓
Cognitive and Emotional Considerations	Impression Perceived incompetence Helplessness Anxiety and fear Shyness	✓	✓	

Source: Key informant interviews

Relational considerations: Degree of closeness to indicate reticent behavior

Relational considerations manifest in the level of one's closeness, the (absence of) motivation to correct, difficulty or ease in correcting family members, and their respect for elders. This kind of consideration gets manifested in three ways:

– *Closeness in relationship*: most of the participants pointed out that the degree of closeness with the individual who posted or shared false information is a major determinant. One participant (P3) said choosing whom to interact with gave her a sense of control over the conversation. This participant's reticence on this score indicates the want to evade conflict for the sake of keeping relationships intact. On the contrary, limited closeness can stir reticence. Another participant revealed that he does not feel responsible for correcting those he is not close with:

"I'm not responsible for their stupidity. For me, if they choose to believe, that's on them. What I care about is for those close to me not to look stupid." [P4]

– *Familial ties*: familial ties also influence respondents' reticence. These ties can either make it easier to correct other people online (P1, P3, P4) because participants feel comfortable opening up to them, or more difficult because of family members' expectations (P2) and strong influence over beliefs. P2, for example, felt that she grew up ("*doon ako lumaki*" in Filipino) in that filter bubble and she thus ruminates on whether or not family members might call her out for a reaction. Due to this, P2 ends up scrolling down her Facebook news feed.

– *Respect for elders*: age is also a heavy influence on participants' decision-making to become reticent. Participants believe older people do not take information from younger ones. P7 said those who are older carry pride and think they know more than younger audiences. Some participants get intimidated when arguing with elders who appear more knowledgeable. This response relates to nuances of Filipino cultural practices, like respect for elders (P4). For example, P2 shared: *"I didn't argue anymore because it might destroy our relationship and I might be deemed disrespectful to elders".* This reasoning indicates the reticent individual's worry of either being called out for being "disrespectful" or severing the relationship when conflict arises in the process of attempting correction.

Other participants believe those from the same age group are easier to communicate with.

Discussions are relatively healthier because members of Gen Z are known to check facts more frequently (P8). However, it would still depend on how firmly they hold on to their beliefs and disregard those of others ("*wala akong paki-alam sa'yo*" in Filipino [P7]). "Fanatics" are very difficult to correct because of their strong inclination to believe their "idols" (P8). Others find people who believe in false information funny (P4) or shameful (P7).

Proximal considerations: viewpoints and preferences that stir reticent behavior

Participants consider their proximal stance from others' viewpoints, their preferred news topic and medium for communicating. On this score, reticence gets shown in the following:

– *Divergent views:* participants' positions toward others' viewpoints are interlaced with their initiative to seek updates or verification from other sources. All participants said they empathize more with posts holding viewpoints similar to theirs because they believe them to be more credible, able to validate what they know. Such viewpoints are perceived as relatable, and appear more frequently on their feed (P4). P4 also said that bias is normal. There is also empathy for those who share information from sources they follow but not for those who just share opinions (P8).

Some participants become irritated when they face views different from theirs, especially when the posts are problematic or not fact-based. P3 explained a reason for the dissociation with those who believe and post opposing and unverified views:

"It's [stressful] to deal with them. So, I prefer to just keep people who are on the same page as we believe… [I]f your opinion is not based on anything factual, it says a lot about you as a person, the values you uphold. So, I don't like to be associated with people who have problematic stances."

For other participants, having to confront opposing views is "toxic" (P1) and anxiety-inducing, especially when they are lengthy (P2). P1 said it is better to disengage to avoid the "toxic" task of having to correct the person, indicating that it is better to step away from the possibility of conflict.

Despite the frustration over false information still spreading and many believing them when there are fact-checking websites, pity still arose in some participants:

"I pity them because maybe they are not getting sufficient education or their decisions are merely being influenced by their families." [P8]

Participants' initiative to seek updates or verification from other sources is generally low, as five respondents indicated. For example, P5 does not have any initiative at all and simply waits for updates while scrolling through their news feed. When participants feel the need to look for more up-to-date information, they will cross-check with sources they trust. Cross-checking, said P2, is "to validate mostly my curiosity or second thoughts about what the popular media is giving us". Some only cross-check when they themselves share false information. P3 searches a news item online to check if the information and her understanding of it is right, then shares the correct information.

– *Preferred topic*: another consideration that is proximal is how participants feel toward the subject in discussion. Participants consider the extent of their knowledge on a certain topic when considering whether to rectify false information or not. Most of the news topics participants avoid online are politics, business and economics, history, and religion. Politics, which is also the subject of most false information they encounter, is the topic they least prefer to correct because of the current political climate of the Philippines at the time this paper

was written (the May 2022 national elections), where many were vocal about how they disagreed with one's candidate choice. That is why some respondents find politics a sensitive topic (P8) that provokes difficult, heated discussions or debates (P5), hinting at avoidance of conflict and thus, reticence. Consequently, respondents prefer topics related to sociological issues, arts, science and health, weather, sports, and pop culture. One's familiarity with the subject (P1 & P6) is why participants prefer to only engage with certain topics that feel close to them.

Overall, the perceived worthiness of a topic affects how participants would react; some participants would not comment if the topic was not valuable to them. P2 applies this as a barometer:

"I evaluate if this (post) is worth my time; is this information that important for me to comment or not?"

– *Preferred medium*: The medium where the message will be delivered affects their decision to correct false information or not. Despite their reticence, almost all participants (except for P7) correct privately, in person, or online. One participant (P6) did not correct publicly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, corrected others at the onset of the pandemic, and then stopped in mid-2021.

Almost all participants (except P7) usually encounter false information on Facebook, others on TikTok. False information particularly comes from Facebook pages, groups, and private individuals—its algorithms push users' topics of interest (P8). With the prevalence of false information, majority of the participants have expressed that they prefer to correct it privately to avoid shaming the source. In relation, it is easier for some and more convincing for others, to correct in person because one can see their interlocutor's reactions and check if the receiver is paying attention. In contrast, some participants prefer to correct publicly because they have no personal relationship with the source of the false information and make others in the comment section aware of it. The downside is that communicating online is more prone to misunderstandings (P6). Nevertheless, it may be easier to correct online because it protects the identity of users and thus avoids labeling (P2).

Cognitive and emotional considerations: emotions sway one's reticent disposition

These considerations cover certain notions and emotions when they encounter false information, affecting their decision to publicly rectify such falseness. Here, participants gave five specific considerations that reflect how cognition and emotion drive their reticence.

– *Impression*: participants' reasons for their reticence and conditions if they choose to correct also depend on how they view those who share false information. Participants are aware that correcting is important despite their conscious decision to avoid doing so. For the most part, they argue that it would be a useless endeavor to speak words that would fall on deaf ears. For example, P3 sees correcting as a "battle" not too concerning to take up arms:

"[I]t's important, but you also have to choose your battles because sometimes, many people correct others and then they will not believe them. So, what's the use?"

Many participants already carry assumptions about the discussion's outcome and perceive that others are close-minded, unyielding to correction, too lazy to verify, or, as P3 said, egotistic. Egotism arises when one carries a high ego, "they believe what they want to believe even if it's not true" (P3). Some assume they might simply be misunderstood. Reticent news audiences consider what the person being corrected would feel, concerned that the latter might

appear foolish or react in a hostile manner. Such a reaction, P4 explained, might arise because "they feel they are being put to shame [on] their own wall."

– *Perceived incompetence*. Communication skills also play a role for the participants, with majority of them believing they can effectively deliver their messages. However, most of them think they still need to enhance their communication skills to correct false information (thus, the feeling that they are less competent persists). Some of these skills include *improving how to approach others* (P2 & P5), *communicating with strangers* (P4), *practicing how not to be taken negatively* (P6) or *angrily* (P4) as their intention is only to *correct* (P7), and *refining their fluency in English* (P8). An example of such perceived skill inadequacy comes from one participant:

"I am honest that I am not that good at communicating especially in English because I am not fluent, while some people who argue are fluent in English. It looks like Filipinos are "grammar Nazis." [P8]

– *Helplessness*: when asked if the participants feel that they lose control of how the conversation will go, the reasons stem from their impression of others, ability to convince, and closeness to the receiver (P4). Three-fourths of participants have expressed that they sometimes lose control over the conversation. One participant (P2) said she experienced feeling powerless in convincing the one being corrected, while another participant (P7) was unsure how the conversation would go. This sense of helplessness stems from the receiver's close-mindedness and the participant's belief that they have no control over conversations with certain groups: individuals they are not close to (P4), elders who appear more knowledgeable (P2), or those who believe false information because it is shared more frequently than accurate information (P5).

– *Anxiety and fear*: participants feel anxious about publicly rectifying false information, and in relation, fear is also present. Some participants expressed anxiety about dealing with false information online, such as uncertainty about how to respond to a 'keyboard warrior' (P2) or fear of becoming the subject of discussion on Facebook (P8). The researchers also asked the possible reasons why participants (do not) fear correcting false information. Reticent individuals are afraid to make a mistake (P3, P8) and have others question how certain they are to tell who is right or wrong (P5, P8) or if they themselves have sufficient information (P8).

However, their fear of publicly correcting lies more in the prospective negative outcomes. There is fear that the argument might go viral, which can cause stress (P8), or cause participants to be judged (P2), shamed online and exposed on Facebook (P7), "canceled" (P8), or worse, "hacked" or even "red-tagged" (P8). According to Tuazon and Torres (2020), red-tagging or red-baiting, is "a form of harassment or persecution of a person identified or suspected as a communist sympathizer" (p. 22). This emotion implies fear of conflict, as expressed by P8 when she explained why she corrects in private:

"More people are involved online, whether you know them or not, since it is public. If an argument escalates, it can get stressful because it would be more widespread, also considering the fear that the argument might go viral."

– *Shyness*: when addressing allegedly false information, participants' relationships and level of closeness influence their reluctance to speak up. For instance, one participant (P1) noted that being close to the source makes her hesitant to correct them, as she fears being perceived as self-righteous. Others are shy to correct those whom they are not close with (P8), especially strangers, because there is no guarantee they will listen (P6). Some participants are

embarrassed to make a mistake (P2) or turn out to be wrong when correcting others (P6). This contradicting imagined scenario poses avoidance of conflict, like what P8 expressed:

"There is a possibility that when I say something, it might only be a one-sided perspective and they could say something that would counter what I said."

Other means to express

Although the participants are reticent to correct false information publicly, they resort to other means to express themselves. Some participants (P2, P8) react to posts because it is the most convenient way to express themselves. Others report the post because there is no assurance that the receiver will listen and doing this would not embarrass the participant on Facebook (P7). One participant unfriends, unfollows, or blocks them. For some, they hope that others (P2, P4) or the "right people" (P3) will do the correction.

Despite not correcting publicly, participants are aware that it could affect others and the truth – that is, false information would continue to spread, and it would affect more people. Two participants believe that belief in false information could determine wrong decisions. One of the respondents said the following about people making choices based on false information:

"We will end up having more problems, especially in politics, because you (those who believe in false information) end up electing someone who is problematic and will further ruin the society, the country. So in the end, it will also backfire [on] them through the choices they make." [P3]

A participant (P2) also expressed her concern over the possibility that not rectifying publicly false information might cause further division among people. She noted that in the Philippines, viewpoints, substantially on politics, already differ. The effects of not correcting will also be present in the journalism field—the decision to withhold corrections would cause a lack of trust in journalists and would blur the truth (rendering that truth "subjective") (P2).

Discussion and conclusion

This qualitative study sought to determine reasons for online news consumers' reticence and reluctance to correct false information online. Findings from this interview-based study of eight reticent young social media users (who do not publicly correct false information) show that reticence is dependent on a web of factors besides Keaten and Kelly's (2000) six components of their model of reticence. Research participants' reticence is tied to three sets of considerations—*relational*, *proximal*, and *cognitive and emotional*—that blend these online news users' approaches to dealing with others and their adherence to some (Filipino) cultural nuances that drive their reticent behaviors.

Dissonant and muted: the barriers of age and tradition

In a sense, some of these findings fit the Cognitive Dissonance and Muted Group theories, with proximal considerations jiving with cognitive dissonance and relational considerations fitting the muted group theory. Findings suggest that reticent individuals experience cognitive dissonance when refusing to publicly correct false information despite knowing the importance of communication and the outcomes of not doing so. The Cognitive Dissonance

theory holds that people are more inclined to settle for what appeases like contradictory notions held at the same time by succumbing to opinion-reinforcing information, hence leading to polarization (Qureshi et al., 2020). So, when online news audiences encounter information that contradict what they know, instead of rectifying what is false, they simply look for reaffirming information for consistency and positive emotions (Spohr, 2017; Qureshi et al., 2020). Findings show that participants resort to another compromise—finding alternatives—to settle this conflict. In both ways of responding to dissonance, polarization could remain because false information is not addressed upfront.

Findings have shown a perceived generational rift among age groups. Participants, aged 20 to 26 years old, expressed that it is a long-respected Filipino tradition to show fastened respect for elders, and the latter take pride in this treatment. Participants believe older people might argue that they are more knowledgeable and experienced. As one participant said, superiority makes older people headstrong, refusing to accept that they are wrong. This observation may stem from the fact that dominant groups, due to their position of power, often fail to recognize the silencing of reticent individuals from younger generations. (Barkman, 2018). Others expressed that their opinions or corrections are often dismissed because of older people's common Filipino reasoning: "*napagdaanan ko na 'yan*" ("Been there, done that"). Issues of power are entangled in cases as such where one party feels they are being silenced (Yi, 2020). These lived experiences from participants fit with the thrust of the Muted Group theory: that there is an inequality wherein sub-dominant groups are somewhat silenced by dominant groups who have more control over language. They are able to create and define the terms, whereas the sub-dominant groups' ideas are less respected, marginalized, stigmatized, or muted (Barkman, 2018).

In Filipino culture, communities have a hierarchical organization that respects status and seniority to maintain order (Mulder, 1994). It explains the deep-rooted value of respect for elders that reticent individuals carry. Relative inequality based on age is a primary trait of the hierarchy that instills in Filipinos an obligation to internalize and not merely reciprocate moral behavior (Mulder, 1994). This is evident in Filipino family structures: family is a double-edged sword. Participants either find it easier to call out belief in false information because of closeness or find it more difficult to call it out because of their family's rigid views and influence over the individual's beliefs. Not being able to obey or "disrespecting" the belief of family members, more so the elders, causes discomfort or shame (Mulder, 1994) for not practicing *pakikisama* (comradeship). Reticent individuals hold back from correcting in order not to risk offending or embarrassing those who post false information (Gurgun et al., 2022). Sessa and colleagues (2020) found that reticent communicators feel empathy for receivers and imagine the possible unpleasant result of displeasing truth. This suggests that *pakikisama* (comradeship) keeps them from correcting because of their utmost regard for the feelings of others (Chan & Litam, 2021). Consequently, opinions get voiced out with much careful deliberation to avoid controversy (Mulder, 1994; Gurgun et. al, 2022).

With careful analysis, reticent news audiences could be characterized as "angrily disengaged", wherein their response to being muted is to withdraw in disconcertment. They may also be characterized as "resigned," wherein they grow apathetic and disengage (Meares et al., 2004, pp. 15–17). Since the subdominant younger group is unable to express their sentiments and correct false information posted or shared by older groups, false information could eventually strengthen polarization (Qureshi et al., 2020). Hierarchy, obligation, immersion in a group, and shared origin are strong identity markers (Mulder, 1994). Relationships and social circles also affect muting opinions (Barkman, 2018).

Homophily's grip on polarization

Reticent individuals become more empathetic toward those with similar views and see those who have different views otherwise. One participant seemed to show stronger outgroup antipathy and did not want to be associated with those who had "problematic stances". In the same way, reticent individuals also think that those who would be corrected might react in a hostile manner toward them. A clear sign of firm, uncompromising beliefs highlights an "us-versus-them" notion that pushes the possibility of empathetic relations with opposing views further away (Lee et al., 2017; Aida et al. 2020). This attitude is characterized by two types of segregation: "ingroup favoritism" for those who share the same ideology and "outgroup antipathy" toward those with opposing beliefs (Lee et al., 2017). This repulsive outlook obstructs civil discussion online and could keep reticent individuals in their echo chambers (Lee et al., 2017; Aida et al., 2020).

This situation makes it unlikely that reticent news audiences would go to great lengths to look for opposing views and diverse news sources, especially with homophily buttressing echo chambers. A participant said not publicly correcting false information would further divide society, pushing groups to believe the opposite of another group's beliefs. Majority of the participants said their decision not to correct depends on the influence of family and their closeness with the person who shared it. They found it easier to communicate with those from the same age group.

These findings also build on existing evidence: associations with those from similar backgrounds and characteristics, including age, localize the spread of information, and restrict diversity (McPherson et al., 2001; Gillani et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021). This phenomenon powers echo chambers because similar perspectives only move in the same circle (Gillani et al., 2018). Additionally, highly politicized topics strengthen group identities in homogeneous circles (Gillani et al., 2018), and then strengthen polarization (Melki & Sekeris, 2019). The study's findings corroborate these: participants find it most difficult to engage with political news because of others' strongly held beliefs, making the situation more difficult to correct wrong views. Reticent individuals avoid arguing over politics because of its controversial nature among Filipinos. The confinement of information is opportunistic for the reinforcement of ideological polarization (Aida et al., 2020).

Building on an existing model of reticence

The findings of this study partially affirmed and challenged Keaten and Kelly (2000) model's six components applied in the context of publicly correcting false information. Keaten and Kelly (2000) said that reticent people are aware that "communication is needed to survive in a social world" (p. 170). The participants, as news audiences, believe that communication is important because it guides them and are fully aware of the result of not publicly correcting false information. Furthermore, most participants said they would consider publicly correcting under given circumstances. This study shows that, in practice, despite these beliefs of reticent news audiences, there are greater considerations, emotions, and beliefs that reticent individuals add to the scale.

Most participants said they are able to deliver their messages, contrary to what Keaten and Kelly (2000) noted about reticent people reporting problems in delivery. However, they believe that they need to improve certain communication skills to publicly rectify false information, particularly how to approach others effectively. Meanwhile, it is said that reticent

communicators experience helplessness. Most of them partly affirm this. However, this inability to control the conversation was mainly attributed to the participants' perceived condition of the receiver, but not necessarily because they view failure as an unavoidable result of talking, as stated in the model.

The reason for the anxiety of reticent communicators was the "fear" of "negative evaluation," as supported by the findings of this research. The common causes of anxiety and fear are being judged and embarrassed, which is common among Filipinos in the cultures of shame (*hiya*) and *amor propio*. They are afraid to make mistakes, be questioned, and be the subject of discussion on social media. *Amor propio* is linked with the fear of being "canceled." Gurgun and coauthors (2022) said facing this sort of cyber aggression or possibility of being ostracized could be a factor for reticence. In relation to social acceptance, a more serious concern is the fear of being "red-tagged."

Keaten and Kelly (2000) said devaluation happens when the value of communication in a personal setting is reduced. The participants are aware that communication is important in addressing misunderstandings. Another way to devalue communication, according to the model, is through shyness: reticent communicators believe they are just the way they are. Shyness in publicly correcting false information stems from the same reason as what causes anxiety and fear: negative evaluation and closeness to the source of false information. For this study, the mere perception of oneself as shy cannot be seen entirely as a reason to avoid publicly correcting false information.

Finally, given the self-perceived incompetence, anxiety, and beliefs of reticent individuals, they withdraw from situations where they need to talk (Keaten & Kelly, 2000). However, this study's participants withdrew from publicly correcting mainly for peace of mind, avoidance of escalating arguments, or the belief that it is not their responsibility to correct certain people.

Apart from the factors that push for withdrawal provided by Keaten and Kelly (2000), the medium of communication affects decisions by reticent news audiences to correct false information. The majority of the participants prefer to correct privately. This preference is primarily due to how open one perceives the receiver to be and the participants' extent of knowledge. The outcomes of participants' experiences with privately correcting others varied: the correction was accepted, completely rejected with the source's views unchanged, or acknowledged but opposing beliefs were still maintained.

The researchers express the limitation that eight participants, especially coming from the same age cohort, may be a small sample size to see other (divergent) experiences of reticent social media news audiences. Recruitment of participants became a challenge for the following reasons: the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic in an online education setting; hardships in recruiting online participants from the older cohort of Filipinos; and the difficulty of finding participants who willingly admit experiencing "reticence" given the nature of this kind of behavior. Another limitation of this paper is its focus on political views stemming from political news reportage. We do recognize that reticence by social media news audiences can occur in non-political issues (e.g., sports, entertainment).

The researchers also acknowledge that the cultural nuances that arise in this study are limited to the participants from a specific geo-cultural setting, the Philippines. Nevertheless, we think the different themes and sub-themes that surfaced in this paper may emerge with different sample groups. Yi (2020) emphasized that while culture and language inevitably have a part to play in any sort of discourse, sociocultural origins should not be the default attribu-

tion for one's reticence. She added that culture will provide context to reticent individuals' reasoning, but it is encouraged to study it in light of situation-specific factors, local contexts, and individual narratives (Yi, 2020).

It is also beyond the scope of this study to address what reticent individuals' alternative responses specifically do to the propagation of (false) information. Nonetheless, this research reveals the factors affecting the decision of news audiences to be reticent to publicly correct false information from their social media feeds. This study also humbly provides a groundwork for an underexplored variable in news consumption. Through the insights and experiences of interviewed reticent news audiences, this research wove the existence of false information in echo chambers with the reasons behind the reticence of these interviewed online news audiences.

Future research can quantitatively measure the hierarchical value of factors affecting reticence and the specific effects of reticence on polarization. Reticence can also be studied in different cultural contexts of journalism's engagement with news audiences. Studies on how newsrooms can help minimize reticence online and the possible need for psychological and cultural solutions are also recommended. Nonetheless, this research has provided a unique starting point for the underexplored niche of reticence vis-à-vis the thriving false information inside echo chambers and how this reticence–false information dynamic could further ideological polarization.

Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) declaration by authors

Authors 1 and 2 – study conceptualization; investigation; formal quantitative analysis; writing, original draft; writing, final draft; data validation

Author 3 – writing, original draft; editing; writing, final draft; data validation

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. This research also received no funding.

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