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The Silent Culture of Students: Reproduction of Social Identity Inequality in the Digital Era

Budaya Diam Mahasiswa: Reproduksi Ketimpangan Identitas Sosial di Era Digital

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Abstract

Digital disruption within higher education does not necessarily promote students' critical participation. Critical consciousness must be cultivated through a secure and institutionally supported discussion ecosystem. The culture of silence emerges as self-censorship in response to sensitive issues. This article examines how students' culture of silence in the digital era contributes to the reproduction of social identity inequalities. Using a qualitative approach, the study involved 10 Sociology students at Universitas Negeri Makassar who were purposively selected based on their experiences engaging with sensitive social issues in campus digital spaces. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observation and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that students employ silence to manage social risks, while digital visibility and perceived surveillance intensify self-censorship and shape identity negotiation. When normalized, these practices contribute to unequal participation and recognition, reproducing social identity inequalities across classroom and digital spaces. Rather than functioning as an inherently emancipatory sphere, the digital era may reproduce power relations by transforming individual self-censorship into normalized participation patterns. Student silence therefore represents constrained agency rather than mere passivity.

Keywords: *Culture of Silence, Digital Era, Social Identity.*

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Abstrak

Disrupsi digital dalam pendidikan tinggi tidak serta-merta mendorong partisipasi kritis mahasiswa. Kesadaran kritis perlu dibangun melalui ekosistem diskusi yang aman dan didukung institusi. Budaya diam muncul sebagai bentuk sensor diri dalam merespons isu sensitif. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana budaya diam mahasiswa di era digital berkontribusi terhadap reproduksi ketimpangan identitas sosial. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan melibatkan 10 mahasiswa Sosiologi Universitas Negeri Makassar yang dipilih secara purposif berdasarkan pengalaman merespons isu sosial sensitif di ruang digital kampus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan observasi partisipatif, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa menggunakan diam untuk mengelola risiko sosial, sementara visibilitas digital dan persepsi pengawasan memperkuat sensor diri serta membentuk negosiasi identitas. Ketika dinormalisasi, praktik tersebut menghasilkan partisipasi dan pengakuan yang tidak setara serta mereproduksi ketimpangan identitas sosial. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memaknai diam sebagai agensi yang terkonstrain; secara praktis, penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya ruang pembelajaran digital yang aman, dialogis, dan inklusif.

Kata Kunci*: Budaya Diam, Era Digital, Identitas Sosial, Ketimpangan Sosial*

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INTRODUCTION

The digital era has created virtual spaces as products that attract the performance standards of individuals displayed on various types of platforms (Ivan et al., 2024). Social media platforms, which have become part of the life rhythm of people worldwide, influence socio-cultural aspects related to communication culture. The ability to engage in two-way interaction and develop communication skills was previously acquired through direct practice in the field. Nowadays, communication practice in social interactions has shifted to the virtual realm through social media platforms, primarily used by university students. Social media emphasizes freedom of expression for minority groups, making silence a safe way to avoid stigma and hate speech perpetrated by majority groups (Laudya et al., 2025). Critical participation is weakened, especially among students as minorities in digital spaces. The effect triggers a tendency toward self-censorship and a culture of silence in responding to sensitive issues, especially those related to social identity, inequality, and power relations.

The behavior of self-censorship on social media is also supported by the user provisions applicable on social media platforms by applying them to sensitive content (López-Fraile & Alonso Guisande, 2025). Self-censorship not only addresses ongoing political phenomena but has already reached the socio-cultural level occurring within the current digital era (Helsyanto & Puspitasari, 2025). The phenomenon of a culture of silence cannot be understood merely as a passive attitude, but rather as a social practice related to structures of power. Students, as social actors in the digital era, are constrained by the majority norms that have existed for a long time. Social actors often negotiate themselves on social media by utilizing multiple accounts to avoid social pressure and the need to express themselves secretly (Akhmad et al., 2025). Students often practice their speaking skills by relying on social media such as the YouTube platform, which provides communication training (Anjarwati, 2024). The critical pedagogy perspective considers silence to reflect what Paulo Freire called the culture of silence, which is the condition when individuals or groups choose not to speak due to the internalization of domination (Alfiyah, 2025). Silence is understood not as a lack of critical awareness, but as a response to the social risks of expressing opinions and identities. Digital visibility can intensify these risks, leading students to remain silent even when they recognize social inequalities.

Changes in students' social values in the digital era are reflected in a re-understanding of the values of solidarity and social responsibility as strategies for coping with social pressures (A. C. Putri et al., 2025). Other studies also explain that in a digital context, this mechanism is reinforced by social surveillance, dominant norm pressures, and concerns about negative labeling (Harahap et al., 2024). The digital space, which appears open, actually presents a new form of control through visibility, digital traces, and the potential for symbolic exclusion (Mossner & Walter, 2024). Silence becomes a choice for students as a way to maintain the image they have built in life spaces that provide a sense of peace and minimal social demands (Rahmi, 2024). The culture of silence developing among today's students is a process of forming self-identity in order to be accepted in public spaces as a safe point within the community.

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This practice directs the formation of an imbalanced social identity because the process of its formation cannot be carried out normally within the community; however, there is the intervention of digital spaces as a medium for the formation of a new social identity.

The cultural practice of silence has the potential to reproduce social identity inequalities among students within the campus environment. Experience serves as a way to reflect self-identity through various platforms available in digital spaces (Gomila-Grau et al., 2025; Ramdlani et al., 2024). Social media becomes a virtual space that grants adolescents the freedom to display the social identity they wish to present to the public (Avci et al., 2025). Influencers in digital spaces determine the trend flow of identities to be emulated by audiences, becoming a standard of success in social circles (Farivar & Wang, 2022). Students who are reluctant to voice opinions and critique gender, class, or minority-based injustices increase the likelihood of normalizing inequalities. Social media reflects the development of social identity, which is generally carried out by adolescents through early adulthood (Pérez-Torres, 2024). Students tend to have their own thoughts regarding issues developing on social media, with behavior shown merely as active spectators without active involvement (Marquès-Donoso et al., 2025). Digital content consumption does not necessarily equal active social participation. Students may understand social issues critically but remain silent due to fears of judgment, conflict, or identity exposure. Thus, digital spectatorship can reflect constrained agency shaped by the social risks of visibility and public expression.

The development of social identity displayed by contemporary adolescents is the result of trends emerging in the digital world (G. L. Putri et al., 2025). The culture of silence has had a significant impact on the weak social awareness among university students in absorbing lecture material in class (Le, 2024). This process can be interpreted through the framework of social reproduction, which emphasizes the dominance of symbols maintained through everyday practices, making them appear natural among students. The culture of silence develops not only as an individual response but also as part of a social mechanism that preserves the hierarchy of identity within the academic environment. Cultural values and digital ethical compliance provide opportunities for users to regulate themselves in choosing to actively participate or to be a minority who opts to remain silent (Anom & Rassanjani, 2026). Digital space games played by adolescents are generally related to the personal appearance they want to display and the social identity that is also simultaneously constructed, forming a pseudo-social identity (Sugimura et al., 2025). Digital spaces allow young people to selectively construct and present their identities. However, students may suppress certain identities or opinions to avoid stigma, labeling, or exclusion, linking digital identity construction to the culture of silence.

This gap indicates the need for a more critical analysis of the long-term effects of digital spaces that offer seemingly promising freedom of expression, while on the other hand presenting massive normative pressure and social control. Such pressure occurs in the context of higher education, such as the culture of silence surrounding victims of sexual violence who choose not to report the violence, either due to threats or fear of potential stigma as a victim (Östergren et al., 2025). Other studies also discuss silence as a mechanism to gain positive judgment from the surrounding environment because it keeps one away from stereotypes that may be detrimental to the individual (Su et al.,

2023). The culture developed in the surrounding environment demands that individuals demonstrate the identity expected by their followers rather than based on the reality experienced by social media users (Hanel & Basil, 2023; Purnomo et al., 2021). Digital identity is shaped by self-presentation and audience expectations. Students may choose silence to protect their social reputation and avoid negative judgments, making self-censorship a social strategy for negotiating recognition, belonging, and legitimacy within peer networks.

Previous findings from (Ramdlani et al., 2024) found that social media provides opportunities for identity expression and interpersonal engagement, while (Coyne et al., 2023; Novalia & Karmila, 2025) highlighted the roles of privacy, self-censorship, and identity management in shaping young people's digital experiences. (Le, 2024; Rahmi, 2024) further demonstrated that student silence can be influenced by classroom culture, identity, and perceived social risks. Recent studies have increasingly examined students' digital participation from the perspectives of activism, media literacy, identity formation, and digital self-presentation. However, these studies tend to examine digital participation and silence separately. Digital participation is generally discussed in relation to engagement and identity, whereas silence is more often treated as a classroom participation problem or an individual response to social pressure.

The present study addresses this gap by bringing these dimensions together and examining the culture of silence as a mechanism connecting students' identity negotiation, digital visibility, and the reproduction of social inequality. Rather than viewing silence as passivity, this study conceptualizes it as a form of constrained agency through which students negotiate the risks of public expression. The novelty lies in linking individual self-censorship with broader processes of social reproduction across interconnected classroom and digital spaces. Based on the research gap and theoretical background, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How does the culture of silence emerge as a strategy for managing social risks among students in academic and digital spaces (2) How do digital visibility, social surveillance, and identity negotiation reinforce students' self-censorship and reproduce unequal social identities? (3) How does the normalization of student silence contribute to unequal participation and the reproduction of social identity inequality in higher education?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative-critical approach grounded in Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction. The study involved 10 Sociology students at Universitas Negeri Makassar who participated in in-depth interviews. The informants were selected purposively because they were considered information-rich cases for examining students' experiences of silence, self-censorship, identity negotiation, and participation in digital and classroom environments. The selection criteria included: (1) being an active Sociology student; (2) being an active social media user; (3) having experienced or observed sensitive discussions concerning gender, social class, minority identities, campus policies, or other social inequalities; and (4) having experienced hesitation, self-censorship, or strategic silence when expressing opinions in academic or digital spaces.

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The informants represented diverse social backgrounds in terms of gender, socioeconomic background, and regional origin. These characteristics were considered analytically relevant because the study examines social identity inequality rather than treating students as a socially homogeneous group. To protect confidentiality, individual participants are identified using codes P1–P10 throughout the findings. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to explore recurring themes concerning social risk, digital visibility, identity negotiation, and participation. Participatory observation was conducted in a limited manner on class discussion dynamics and academic digital interactions (such as online forums or learning groups) in order to capture silent practices, non-verbal responses, and patterns of unequal participation. Informants were purposively selected based on the criteria of being active social media users who had experienced dilemmas in expressing themselves on sensitive issues. Data validity was reinforced through technique triangulation (interviews and observation), researcher reflexivity, and member checking to ensure the accuracy of interpretations of participants' experiences.

The research analysis flow syntax is developed in five stages based on critical pedagogy and social reproduction: (1) Problem Identification, mapping forms of culture of silence and self-censorship as lived experiences of students; (2) Thematic-Critical Coding, grouping data into categories such as culture of silence, digital habitus, symbolic capital, and symbolic violence; (3) Relational-Structural Analysis, examining the links between practices of silence and majority norms, digital surveillance, as well as identity hierarchies on campus; (4) Critical-Dialectical Reflection, interpreting how the internalization of domination occurs and how students negotiate safe spaces; and (5) Transformative Projection, formulating implications for the development of critical pedagogy that opens space for participatory dialogue and social awareness. This flow asserts that the culture of silence serves as a mechanism for reproducing identity inequalities that operates symbolically within digital academic spaces, while also opening the possibility for more emancipatory pedagogical interventions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis identifies four interconnected processes. These processes indicate that silence moves beyond an individual communicative choice and becomes a mechanism through which existing patterns of recognition, participation, and inequality can be reproduced across interconnected classroom and digital spaces.

Culture of Silence as Social Risk Management

The first finding demonstrates that students' silence is primarily shaped by their anticipation of social risks associated with public expression. Students described situations in which they had opinions but deliberately chose not to express them because speaking could generate disagreement, negative judgment, interpersonal tension, or exclusion from their peer group. Silence therefore operates as a strategic

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response to a social environment in which the consequences of speaking are perceived as potentially more costly than the consequences of remaining silent. One student explained:

“Sometimes I actually have something to say, but I just keep it to myself. Like, what if people take it the wrong way and then it gets awkward? Honestly, staying quiet feels safer.” (P1-interview)

The statement indicates that silence does not necessarily reflect the absence of an opinion. The student possesses something to say but evaluates the potential consequences before deciding to remain silent. The expression “staying quiet feels safer” is particularly significant because it reveals silence as a form of risk management. The student's decision is intentional, but it is simultaneously shaped by anticipated social sanctions.

A similar process appears in relation to group disagreement:

“If everyone already agrees with one opinion, I usually don't wanna be the one who goes against it. It can turn into trouble, so I don’t care.” (P2-interview)

The anticipated possibility of “trouble” functions as an informal sanction. Students learn that challenging a dominant opinion may produce undesirable consequences, even when no formal punishment exists. Consequently, conformity is maintained through the anticipation of peer reactions. The social environment does not have to explicitly prohibit disagreement; students regulate themselves because they have learned to anticipate how disagreement may be received.

Another student described silence as a strategy for preserving social relationships:

“I mean, sometimes you just choose peace. Even if you disagree, you don't have to say everything. I'd rather stay quiet than make things complicated with my friends.” (P3-interview)

This account illustrates how silence becomes embedded in everyday norms of maintaining harmony. The decision to “choose peace” suggests that students assign positive social value to avoiding conflict, while disagreement becomes associated with relational disruption. Silence consequently acquires a normative dimension: it is not merely something students do, but something they come to perceive as socially appropriate.

This finding extends and reinforces (Spínola, 2023) research by demonstrating about the perspective of Freire's critical pedagogy. This finding is important because critical participation requires individuals to recognize their capacity to name and question the social realities surrounding them. However, the students' accounts indicate

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that the capacity to speak is constrained when expression is associated with social risk. Their silence can therefore be understood as an indication of a communicative environment in which dialogue is not equally experienced as safe or legitimate. This finding is consistent with the argument advanced by (Brown & Lloyd, 2024) who suggests about Bourdieu's conception of social reproduction. Students operate within a social field containing implicit expectations regarding appropriate behavior, agreement, and belonging. These expectations influence students' practical choices without requiring explicit coercion. What appears to be an individual decision to remain silent is consequently shaped by socially acquired dispositions concerning what can safely be said and to whom.

This finding extends the conventional understanding of student silence. Rather than interpreting silence as a deficit of confidence or participation, this study conceptualizes it as constrained agency. Students actively choose silence, but their choices are structured by anticipated social consequences. The significance of silence therefore lies precisely in this tension between agency and social constraint.

Digital Visibility and Social Surveillance as Mechanisms of Self-Censorship

The second finding demonstrates that the social risks associated with expression become more complex in digital environments. Students perceived social media as a space characterized by persistent visibility, potentially indefinite circulation of content, and exposure to multiple audiences. These conditions encourage students to anticipate how their expressions might be interpreted and judged. As a result, students engage in self-censorship before expression occurs. One student stated:

“I think twice before posting anything serious. You never know who's gonna see it or screenshot it. So yeah, sometimes I just don't post.” (P4-interview)

The student's concern about screenshots illustrates how digital visibility changes the perceived consequences of expression. A statement that might disappear in a face-to-face interaction can potentially be recorded, circulated, and encountered by audiences beyond the original context. Students therefore develop an awareness of being potentially observed even when no one is visibly monitoring them.

Another student emphasized the possibility of misinterpretation:

“On social media, people can judge you so fast. Maybe you mean something normal, but they can read it differently. That's why I usually delete or don't upload stuff if I'm not sure.” (P5-interview)

The phrase “if I'm not sure” illustrates the role of uncertainty in producing self-censorship. Students cannot fully control how audiences interpret their expressions, and

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this lack of control encourages them to reduce the possibility of negative evaluation by withholding content.

This finding suggests that digital technology simultaneously expands and constrains communicative participation. Social media provides students with unprecedented opportunities to express opinions, construct identities, and interact with broader audiences. Yet the same visibility that enables participation also increases the perceived risks associated with expression. The digital environment thus produces a paradox of expanded communicative capacity alongside intensified self-regulation.

Through Bourdieu's framework, this process can be understood as a form of symbolic regulation. Students develop practical dispositions concerning what is appropriate to display and what should remain private. Such dispositions are not necessarily imposed by a formal authority; rather, they emerge through repeated experiences of evaluation and the anticipation of others' judgments. This interpretation is further supported by (Zerubavel, 2024) who argues that digital visibility consequently becomes a mechanism through which students internalize social expectations.

The present finding aligns with previous research conducted by (Mones et al., 2022) which indicates that Freire's critical pedagogy provides a complementary interpretation. Critical dialogue requires an environment in which individuals can articulate experiences, question assumptions, and engage with alternative perspectives. When students routinely anticipate judgment and therefore censor themselves, the potential for dialogical participation becomes restricted. The problem is consequently not simply that students have access to digital platforms, but that access does not automatically produce emancipatory participation.

The finding thus strengthens the study's central novelty: digital self-censorship is not treated as an isolated online behavior but as a mechanism connecting individual expression with broader processes of social regulation. What begins as an individual decision not to post can contribute to a wider pattern in which particular forms of expression become increasingly invisible.

Identity Negotiation under Digital Visibility and Social Pressure

The third finding reveals that silence and self-censorship are closely connected to the negotiation of social identity. Students do not simply decide whether to speak; they also consider what kind of person they will appear to be if they speak. Consequently, identity becomes an important consideration in determining which opinions, emotions, and experiences students are willing to make visible. One student explained:

“Online, I don't really show everything about myself. I kinda choose what people get to see. Like, there's the real me, but there's also the version of me that makes sense for social media.” (P6-interview)

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This statement demonstrates that students understand digital identity as selective and relational. The distinction between “the real me” and “the version of me” indicates that self-presentation involves continuous negotiation between personal identity and audience expectations.

Another student described the pressure to maintain a consistent image:

“Sometimes I wanna post something random or controversial, but then I'm like, ‘Nah, that's not really my image. I don't want people to suddenly see me differently.” (P7-interview)

The concern about being “seen differently” demonstrates that identity is experienced as socially consequential. Students recognize that particular expressions may alter how others categorize or evaluate them. Silence therefore becomes a strategy for protecting a preferred social identity. The relational character of identity negotiation is further illustrated by another student:

“You kinda adjust depending on who you're talking to. With close friends, I'm more open, but online or with people I don't know that well, I filter myself a lot.” (P8-interview)

The student describes a differentiated pattern of self-expression according to audience. This demonstrates that students do not simply possess a fixed identity that is either expressed or suppressed. Instead, identity is continuously negotiated across social contexts.

These findings are particularly significant when interpreted through Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction. Students enter social spaces with different forms of social and cultural capital, and the legitimacy of particular ways of speaking is not distributed equally. This finding extends (Wang et al., 2026) scholarship by demonstrating that certain styles of expression may be more readily recognized as credible, appropriate, or legitimate than others. Students consequently learn to adjust their presentation according to the social field in which they participate. In this context, constrained agency provides a useful conceptual bridge between individual action and structural conditions. Students exercise agency by deciding what to reveal, conceal, or modify. These decisions are conditioned by expectations concerning reputation, belonging, and social recognition. Agency therefore does not disappear; rather, it operates within socially structured boundaries.

This finding also reinforces Freire's emphasis on voice and dialogue. For Freire, meaningful participation involves more than physically being present in a learning environment; it requires the ability to articulate one's experiences and critically engage with the world. When students continuously modify their voices to conform to anticipated expectations, participation may remain formally available while becoming substantively constrained.

Thus, identity negotiation represents a crucial link in the study's conceptual argument. Digital visibility does not merely influence what students say; it influences

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how students manage who they are allowed to appear to be. Silence consequently becomes part of identity work rather than merely an absence of communication.

Normalized Silence, Unequal Participation, and the Reproduction of Social Identity Inequality

The fourth finding demonstrates the broader social consequences of the processes identified above. When students repeatedly experience silence as safer, self-censorship as necessary, and identity management as normal, these practices can become normalized patterns of participation. At this stage, silence moves beyond an individual strategy and becomes embedded within the social organization of interaction. One student described this normalization:
“Honestly, we're kinda used to it. If the topic is sensitive, most people just stay quiet. Nobody really asks why, because that's just how things work.” (P9-interview)

The phrase “that's just how things work” indicates that silence has become taken for granted. Once normalized, the practice no longer requires conscious justification. Students may reproduce it automatically because it has become part of the expected way of participating in sensitive discussions.

The consequence of this normalization is reflected in another student's account:

“The loud people usually get heard more. If you're quiet or scared of being judged, your opinion just gets left behind. So yeah, not everyone really gets the same chance to speak.” (P10-interview)

This statement reveals the connection between silence and unequal participation. Although all students may formally possess the opportunity to speak, their actual capacity to participate is not necessarily equal. Those who are more comfortable with dominant expectations of expression may occupy greater communicative space, while those who anticipate greater social risks may become less visible.

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction provides a particularly useful framework for understanding this process. Social inequality is reproduced not only through explicit institutional exclusion but also through everyday practices that determine whose behavior, language, and identity receive recognition. When particular forms of participation become normalized as legitimate, students who conform to those expectations are more likely to be heard and recognized, while others may remain peripheral. The process can therefore be conceptualized as:

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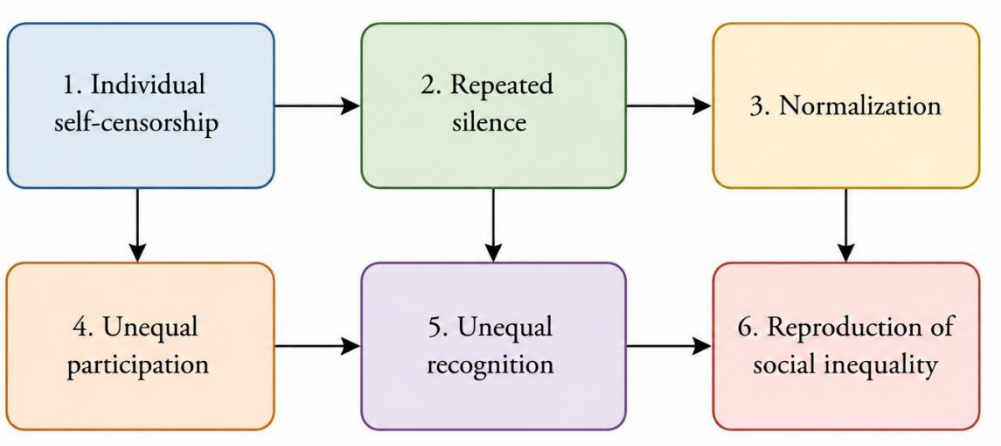


Figure 1. Conceptual Flow of the Reproduction of Social Inequality (adapted from research findings).

This mechanism is central to the novelty of the present study. The findings demonstrate that individual decisions to remain silent should not be separated from broader processes of social reproduction. What initially appears to be a personal strategy for avoiding social risk can accumulate into a collective pattern that distributes opportunities for recognition and participation unevenly.

This finding offers a new perspective on (Wang et al., 2026) research by this normalization represents a challenge to the development of genuinely dialogical learning spaces. A classroom may appear participatory because students are given opportunities to speak, while the underlying social conditions continue to discourage particular students from using those opportunities. Critical pedagogy therefore requires more than providing a platform for voice; it requires questioning why some voices are easier to express and recognize than others. The implication is that educational intervention should not simply encourage students to “speak up.” Such an approach risks individualizing a socially structured problem. Instead, educators need to cultivate classroom and digital environments in which disagreement is legitimate, diverse identities are recognized, and students are not socially penalized for expressing alternative perspectives.

Integrative Discussion: From Constrained Agency to Social Reproduction

Taken together, the four findings demonstrate that the culture of silence among students develops through a sequential and interconnected social process. Silence initially emerges as a strategy for managing the social risks associated with disagreement and negative evaluation. This process is intensified within digital environments, where visibility and perceived surveillance encourage students to censor their expressions. Self-censorship subsequently becomes part of identity negotiation, as students selectively present themselves according to anticipated audience expectations and concerns about social acceptance. When these practices are repeatedly enacted, silence can become normalized within everyday interaction, producing unequal

opportunities for participation and recognition. Thus, what initially appears to be an individual decision to remain silent can develop into a broader social mechanism through which communicative inequalities are reproduced across interconnected classroom and digital spaces.

This process can be further understood by bringing Freire's critical pedagogy into dialogue with Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction. These findings corroborate previous research by (Fatahillah et al., 2025) which demonstrates that from a Freirean perspective, meaningful participation requires dialogue, critical reflection, and the capacity to articulate one's experiences and question taken-for-granted social realities. The students' experiences demonstrate, however, that the formal availability of opportunities to speak does not necessarily produce substantive participation. When students anticipate judgment, conflict, or social exclusion, their capacity to exercise voice becomes constrained. From a Bourdieusian perspective, these constraints are embedded within social fields characterized by unequal recognition and implicit expectations regarding legitimate ways of speaking and presenting oneself. Through repeated interaction, students may internalize these expectations as dispositions, making self-censorship and silence appear natural or appropriate.

The two theoretical perspectives therefore complement each other: Freire explains the significance of voice and the conditions that constrain dialogical participation, while Bourdieu explains how these constraints can become normalized and contribute to the reproduction of unequal patterns of participation and recognition. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in connecting these two dimensions through the concept of constrained agency. The findings challenge an understanding of student silence as merely passivity, disengagement, or a lack of critical awareness. Instead, silence represents an active strategy through which students negotiate social risks, digital visibility, and identity expectations, although their choices remain conditioned by the social structures surrounding them.

The study's novelty lies in conceptualizing student silence as constrained agency and demonstrating how individual self-censorship, shaped by digital visibility and identity negotiation, can become normalized and contribute to the reproduction of unequal participation across classroom and digital spaces. By linking micro-level processes of self-regulation with broader processes of social reproduction, this study extends the analysis of student silence beyond the individual level and demonstrates how everyday communicative practices may sustain unequal conditions of voice, recognition, and participation. In this sense, the study contributes to sociology of education and digital sociology by showing that addressing student silence requires not only encouraging students to speak, but also transforming the social conditions that determine whose voices are considered safe, legitimate, and worthy of recognition.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the culture of silence among students is shaped by a complex interaction between social expectations, digital visibility, identity negotiation, and unequal conditions of participation. Silence cannot therefore be reduced to individual passivity or a lack of critical awareness, as students actively manage the risks

associated with public expression while navigating expectations of social acceptance and recognition. However, when such self-regulatory practices become normalized across classroom and digital spaces, they may constrain dialogical participation and contribute to the reproduction of unequal opportunities for voice and recognition. By conceptualizing silence as a form of constrained agency, this study highlights how individual communicative choices are simultaneously shaped by broader social structures, reinforcing the relevance of Freire's emphasis on dialogical participation and Bourdieu's perspective on social reproduction. Future research should examine this process across different educational institutions, social backgrounds, and digital platforms, while incorporating longitudinal and comparative approaches to investigate how patterns of silence, identity negotiation, and participation develop over time and how critical pedagogical interventions may create more equitable spaces for student voice and recognition.

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