Self-censorship in using social media in Bangladesh: Does regime structure matter?

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Abstract
Purpose: This study investigates how Bangladesh's political regime influences social media users' self-censorship by examining how repression, legal frameworks, surveillance, and media control affect online expression and free speech.
Method: This study on self-censorship in Bangladesh used interviews, content analysis, focus groups, and surveys to understand users' online behavior under a hybrid regime. The results showed that laws such as the Digital Security Act increased self-regulation.
Results: The study revealed that regime structure significantly impacts self-censorship on social media in Bangladesh. Democratic environments reduce self-censorship, whereas restrictive regimes increase it. Higher educational levels are associated with greater self-censorship, likely due to heightened awareness of the consequences. Gender and government actions had a minimal impact. An interaction effect demonstrates that a "climate of fear" combined with critical content intensifies self-censorship, emphasizing the role of regime type and freedom of expression in shaping online behavior.
Limitations: The study on self-censorship in Bangladesh has limitations, including sample bias, potential inaccuracies due to self-reporting, overlooking regional variations, and cultural factors, which affect the generalizability of findings across different contexts.
Contributions: This study provides valuable insights into how the regime structure influences self-censorship on social media in Bangladesh. By highlighting the correlation between authoritarian tendencies and increased self-censorship, this study elucidates the impact of laws such as the Digital Security Act on online behavior. The findings contribute to understanding the broader effects of political regimes on digital expression, offering a framework for examining self-censorship in varying political contexts, and informing future research on digital rights and freedom of expression.
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1. Introduction

This study explores the current state of freedom of expression in Bangladesh, where the government is gradually tightening its monitoring and control over the use of Facebook and other social media platforms. Bangladesh, a country navigating the various phases of democratic and hybrid regimes, presents a unique context for the role of social media in self-censorship. It is often described as a hybrid regime in which democratic institutions exist, but are frequently undermined by authoritarian practices. The government exercises significant control over the media, raising concerns about the

erosion of civil liberties, particularly the freedom of speech and expression. The government employs various tools and techniques to suppress dissent, stifling critical comments that could exacerbate its legitimacy crisis and increase the risk of losing power. By creating a climate of fear surrounding political expression and grievances, the government seeks to prevent potential public protests or movements that opposition groups can exploit against the ruling elites. This phenomenon is not unique to Bangladesh, as it is prevalent in many authoritarian regimes worldwide. I posit that there is an inherent relationship between regime structure and freedom of social media use, suggesting that individuals in democracies enjoy greater freedom than those in autocracies. Reason: Improved clarity, vocabulary, and technical accuracy while maintaining the original meaning. The regime structure in Bangladesh has been gradually shifting from electoral democracy (1991-2006) to electoral authoritarianism, or a hybrid regime (Riaz & Riaz, 2019a). Using Bangladesh as a case study, I aim to explore the relationship between this regime change, from democracy to autocracy, and the structures and measures increasingly implemented by the incumbent to control social media discourse.

Despite the growing body of literature on social media, self-censorship, and regime types, a significant research gap persists regarding the specific relationship between Bangladesh's hybrid regime structure and self-censorship on social media. Research on civic engagement and self-censorship in Bangladesh's hybrid governments has revealed complex processes. Due to the government's patronage structure, residents are encouraged to engage informally to fulfill their needs, which has the potential to alter social order through grassroots institutions (Qayum 2021). Social media serve as a tool for exiled dissidents to challenge the authoritarian environment and influence domestic discussions and information dissemination (Kabir, 2023). Press restrictions arising from official secrecy laws, colonial era regulations, and constitutional provisions contribute to political parallelism and self-censorship (Ahmed 2012). The government's inconsistent stance on information and communication technologies (ICTs) advocates public empowerment, while simultaneously enforcing severe crackdowns.

Developing a strong research question is essential and involves several key steps: generating intriguing questions, selecting the most promising one, and transforming it into a testable hypothesis (Lipowski 2008). An effective research question should be specific, challenging, and address a significant issue or problem (Lipowski, 2008; Mattick, Johnston, & de la Croix, 2018). Additionally, it has organizational goals, is feasible within available resources, and has significant significance (Lipowski, 2008).

Based on the problem statement and rationale of the study, the research questions were as follows:
1. Why does the current regime in Bangladesh increasingly impose restrictions on social media? (Regime Structure)
2. What mechanisms and strategies do governments employ to censor social media?
3. What are the implications of censorship for social media users, particularly regarding self-censorship? This study examines self-censorship in Bangladesh since 2006, with a focus on the Awami League (AL) government and the growing use of Facebook. This study employs interviews, questionnaire surveys, and an analysis of government policy documents.

This study aims to investigate the relationship between regime structure and self-censorship in social media use in Bangladesh. Specifically, it seeks to understand how the characteristics of Bangladesh's political regime, including its hybrid nature and legal framework, influence individuals' tendencies to self-censor when engaging in online discourse, particularly on topics related to state criticism and corruption. This study explores the mechanisms through which perceived political repression, legal constraints, and broader political climate shape social media behavior, as well as how these factors contribute to the prevalence of self-censorship among various demographics in the country.

2. Literature review
Research on self-censorship and social media use in Bangladesh reveals complex dynamics that are influenced by the regime's structure and repressive measures. Dissidents in exile use social media to engage in domestic debates and influence public discourse (Kabir, 2023). Social media editors in Bangladeshi newspapers face pressure to remove government-critical comments, perceiving their role as "marketing" news rather than traditional gatekeeping (Alam & Alam, 2024). Online repression

induces self-censorship, particularly among higher-income politically engaged social media users in countries with stringent online restrictions (Ong, 2021). The press in Bangladesh operates under various constraints, including colonial-era regulations, constitutional provisions, and official secrecy laws, which contribute to self-censorship and partisan divisions (Ahmed, 2012). Collectively, these studies highlight how the regime's structure and repressive measures impact self-censorship and social media use in Bangladesh, affecting both journalists and citizens' online political expression and engagement.

Self-censorship on social media is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon influenced by various factors. Studies have shown that users carefully consider the potential consequences of their posts before publishing by employing strategies such as postponing, rephrasing, or seeking feedback to maintain the quality of communication and prevent conflicts (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016). In Turkey, following the 2016 coup attempt, there was a notable decline in government-censored tweets, accompanied by a rise in self-censorship, with 41% of users choosing to delete old tweets (Tanash, Chen, Wallach, & Marschall, 2017).

Self-censorship within Bangladesh's media landscape is shaped by a variety of factors, including colonial era regulations, constitutional provisions, and official secrecy laws (Ahmed 2012). Although the press in the country is partially free, the ongoing restrictions imposed by statutory laws and self-censorship have significantly impeded media freedom (Haque, 2019). The Community Radio Installation, Broadcast, and Operation Policy of 2008 faced criticism for potentially exacerbating self-censorship and political victimization (Gayen, 2012). The case of Taslima Nasrin illustrates the intricate relationship between free speech, censorship, and religious sensitivity in Bangladesh, with censorship laws originating from the British colonial period (Hasan, 2010). Despite these obstacles, journalists and media activists work diligently to navigate restrictions and advocate for press freedom (Haque, 2019). The challenge of balancing press freedom with reasonable restrictions continues to be a contentious issue in Bangladesh, as the nation strives to foster robust democracy while ensuring public safety and national security (Ahmed, 2012; Haque, 2019).

Bangladesh has undergone a transition from electoral democracy to a hybrid regime, characterized by a combination of democratic and authoritarian elements (Riaz & Riaz, 2019a). This shift began after 1991, with the quality of democracy deteriorating over the subsequent two decades (Riaz and Riaz, 2019a). A hybrid regime in Bangladesh is defined by patronage networks, informal participation, and the ruling party's dominance over government institutions (Qayum, 2021). Citizens often engage in informal activities to meet their survival needs, which has led to the emergence of new grassroots-level institutions (Qayum 2021). There are growing concerns about further democratic backsliding and the potential for a hybrid regime to evolve into a more authoritarian system (Riaz & Riaz, 2019a). The future of Bangladeshi politics remains uncertain, with possibilities ranging from increased authoritarianism to national reconciliation and unity (Riaz and Riaz 2019b).

Recent studies have underscored the challenges of freedom of expression in Bangladesh, particularly in the digital sphere. The government has enacted a series of laws, including the Information and Communication Technology Act, Digital Security Act, and Cyber Security Act, which have been employed to suppress dissent and detain academics, journalists, and artists (Shams, 2024). These restrictions have fostered a culture of fear, adversely affecting press freedom and public discourse (Haque 2019). The ongoing tension between ensuring security and safeguarding free speech remains a critical issue, with journalists and activists striving to navigate through these obstacles in pursuit of a more robust democracy that embraces diverse perspectives and constructive criticism (Haque, 2019).

Self-censorship significantly affects social media engagement in Bangladesh, as demonstrated in various studies. Journalists in the country face pressure to self-censor critical comments about the government or ruling party to avoid legal repercussions, resulting in a shift in their traditional gatekeeping role (Alam & Alam, 2024). Furthermore, the Digital Security Act poses a serious threat to journalists, with reports of interrogation and deportation of critical reporting (Aziz & Palmer, 2022).

This climate restricts open discourse and impedes the free flow of information on social media platforms in Bangladesh, ultimately diminishing engagement levels and diversity of voices present online.

Self-censorship on social media in Bangladesh plays a complex role in balancing the freedom of expression with democratic values. While social media companies encourage users to self-censor misinformation (Howe et al., 2023), women in Bangladesh strategically navigate patriarchal norms by exercising their agency on these platforms to prevent abuse and empower themselves (Klose & Jebin, 2024). However, the press in Bangladesh faces significant challenges related to censorship, with journalists encountering restrictions and risks under laws such as the Digital Security Act (Aziz and Palmer 2022). The interplay between self-censorship, freedom of expression, and democratic values in Bangladesh highlights the need for a nuanced approach to ensuring both the protection and promotion of diverse voices in the digital space.

Self-censorship in developed countries across Europe and Asia is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors. In Southeast Asia, higher income, politically engaged social media users are less likely to express their political opinions, particularly in nations with stringent online repression (Ong, 2021). The expansion of markets in East and Southeast Asia can paradoxically encourage self-censorship among media organizations as they strive to avoid conflicts with authoritarian governments that could jeopardize their revenue and legal standing (Rodan, 1998). In Central and Eastern Europe, journalism has adopted characteristics similar to those found in countries without a history of state socialism, despite their previous experiences with state-led censorship (Schimpfössl, Yablokov, Zeveleva, Fedirko, & Bajomi-Lazar, 2020). Self-censorship is defined as the voluntary suppression of information in the absence of formal constraints, which can impede the functioning of democratic societies by restricting access to information and curtailing the freedom of expression (Bar-Tal, 2017). Understanding self-censorship is essential to addressing societal issues and promoting democratic values.

Self-censorship in developed countries varies based on the regime structure and individual proximity to power. In authoritarian systems, individuals with ties closer to the regime tend to self-censor less than those on the periphery (Gueorguiev et al. 2017). However, citizens in many authoritarian regimes do not exhibit higher rates of self-censorship on regime-assessment questions compared to those in democracies (Shen & Truex, 2021). Self-censorship can be categorized as public, in response to external sensors, or private, occurring without public oversight (Cook & Heilmann, 2010). Online repression by governments can induce self-censorship among citizens, particularly affecting higher-income politically engaged social media users in countries with severe online restrictions (Ong, 2021). The effectiveness of self-censorship in controlling the flow of information explains how some authoritarian regimes such as China maintain control over expanding information sectors with minimal overt censorship (Gueorguiev et al., 2017). These findings underscore the complex nature of self-censorship across different political systems and its implications for free speech and authoritarianism.

Research on self-censorship on Facebook indicates that users frequently filter content before sharing, with 71% engaging in last-minute self-censorship (Das & Kramer, 2013). Users are more likely to censor posts than comments, particularly status updates and posts directed at groups, which are influenced by their perception of the audience (Das & Kramer, 2013). In Bangladesh, Facebook pages offer a relatively censorship-free platform for netizens to express their opinions during protests, such as the 2018 Student Protest for Road Safety (Dyuti, 2020). However, the Bangladeshi press faces restrictions due to official secrecy laws, constitutional provisions, and self-censorship, which hinder the media's role in democracy (Ahmed 2012). These factors collectively contribute to the complex landscape of self-censorship on social media platforms, such as Facebook in Bangladesh. Social media, particularly Facebook, has emerged as a significant platform for information sharing and social connectivity in Bangladesh. The platform's influence extends to reshaping social relationships and cultural beliefs in urban areas, potentially impacting traditional interpersonal connections (Habib, Hossain, Ferdous, & Bayezid, 2018). This shift may indicate either a decrease in Facebook's attractiveness as a news source or a decline in the appeal of Bangladeshi media to Facebook users, challenging previous assumptions about the increasing influence of social media on news consumption.

2.1 Analytical Framework
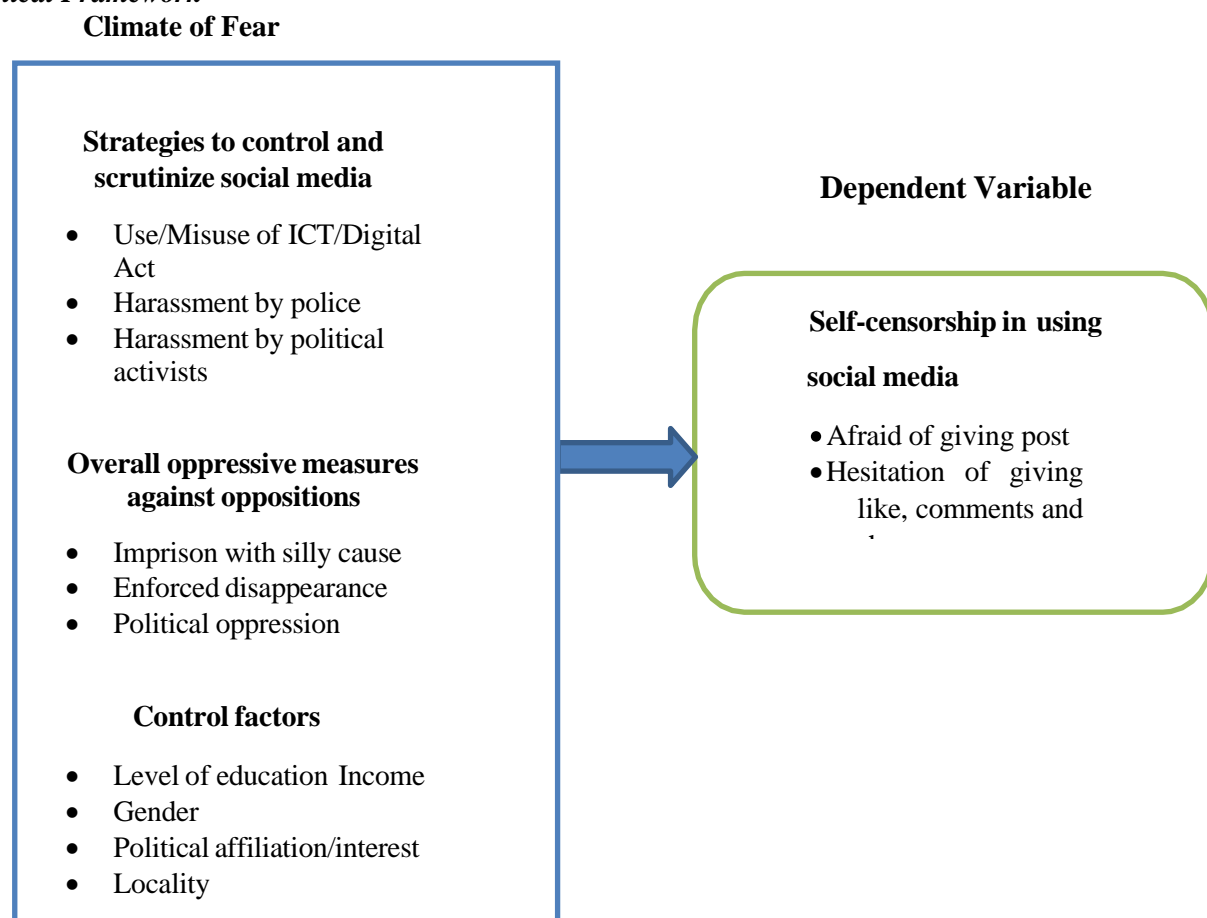### Climate of Fear

Figure 1: Analytical Framework

This study investigates the influence of authoritarianism and network authoritarianism on social media self-censorship, focusing on the fear of political issues and hesitation in sharing sensitive posts. This study uses an analytical framework to understand the relationship between contingency factors and self-censorship. This research will compare the Hasina regime in Bangladesh with other regimes using Survey Monkey Inc., obtaining ethical approval and permission from residents. This study aims to identify the main causes and relationships between regime change and measures taken by incumbents to control social media.

Hypothesis 1: A perceived autocratic political climate (characterized by reduced democraticness) is positively correlated with self-censorship. Conversely, democracy is negatively correlated with self-censorship.

Hypothesis 2: Constrained freedom of expression is positively related to self-censorship.

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between social media posts and activities (related to state criticism and corruption) and self-censorship is influenced by the perceived climate of fear, such that

When the climate of fear is perceived to be low, engaging in social media posts that are critical of the government is associated with low self-censorship (indicating a negative relationship).

When the climate of fear is perceived to be high, social media activities and posts critical of the government are positively related to self-censorship.

The hypothesis that a perceived autocratic political climate (reduced democraticness) is positively related to self-censorship suggests that, as individuals perceive the political environment as more autocratic or less democratic, they are more likely to engage in self-censorship. Conversely, the notion that democraticness is negatively related to self-censorship implies that in more democratic environments where freedom of expression is better protected and encouraged, individuals are less likely to self-censor. H2: The hypothesis that "constrained freedom of expression is positively related to self-censorship" posits that when individuals perceive their ability to express themselves freely as limited or restricted, they are more likely to engage in self-censorship. In other words, the more constrained the environment for free expression, the more individuals will opt to censor their thoughts, opinions, and speech. Reason 1: Improved clarity and vocabulary, corrected minor grammatical issues, and enhanced readability.

The hypothesis examines the relationship between social media activity, specifically posts that are critical of the government, and self-censorship. This emphasizes how this relationship is influenced by the perceived climate of fear. The hypothesis posits that the level of perceived fear within the political or social environment moderates' individuals' willingness to criticize the government online as opposed to feeling compelled to self-censor.

The hypothesis posits that a climate of fear moderates the relationship between engaging in social media posts that criticize the government and the degree to which individuals self-censor. In other words, the level of fear that individuals perceive in their environment influences their willingness to express critical views or their inclination to refrain from doing so.

Low Perceived Fear: When individuals perceive the climate of fear to be low, they believe that the risks of expressing critical views online are minimal. This could be due to a more open and democratic environment where freedom of expression is protected or where there is a strong culture of public dissent and criticism.

 Negative Relationship: In context, engaging in social media activities that are critical of the government is associated with low self-censorship. People feel free to express their opinions without worrying about negative repercussions, which leads to a negative relationship between government criticism and self-censorship. The more people criticize the government online, the less they feel the need to censor.

High Perceived Fear: When individuals perceive a high climate of fear, they believe that expressing critical views online could lead to serious consequences such as legal action, social ostracism, job loss, or even physical harm. This perception is common in more authoritarian or repressive environments, where the government actively monitors and punishes dissent.

Positive Relationship: In such an environment, the relationship between engaging in social media posts critical of the government and self-censorship is positive. Even if individuals engage in some form of criticism, they are likely to self-censor to avoid crossing certain boundaries or minimizing risk. The higher the perceived risk (climate of fear), the more likely individuals are to hold back or alter their expressions, even when criticizing the government.

3. Research Method
This study investigated the influence of contingency factors on social media control strategies in Bangladesh using a mixed-methods approach. It incorporates perspectives from Facebook users and the quantitative data gathered from an online survey. The research approach in this study is shaped by the researcher's epistemological perspective, prior knowledge, and research question. There are two primary types of reasoning: deductive versus inductive, and qualitative versus quantitative. This study empirically examines a behavioral hypothesis by utilizing quantitative research to determine causal relationships.
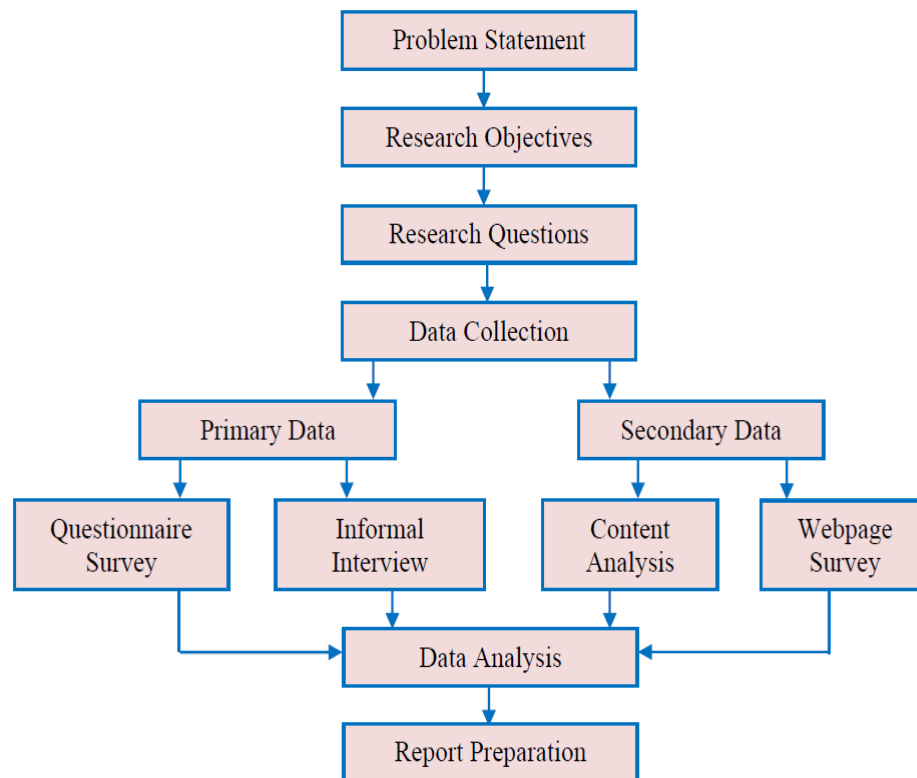
A variety of data collection procedures were employed to collect both the primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from respondents using a standardized questionnaire consisting of a series of questions with a total sample size of 144 participants. In addition, interviews were conducted with specialists. Secondary data were gathered through an analysis of research articles, textbooks, and daily newspapers, while a survey method was documented. This study aimed to gather contextual information from Facebook users who have become victims of the current regime due to their expression of dissenting opinions. The respondents included journalists, opposition activists, academics, and critics, who wrote about misgovernance. The interviews will focus on their experiences in dealing with government agencies and their strategies for advocating freedom of expression. Accessing these victims may be challenging because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, interviews will be conducted online. An online survey was conducted to assess people's perceptions of social media usage and the increasing regulations imposed on these platforms. The survey aimed to evaluate the status of freedom of expression on social media in comparison to previous and current regimes. It has reached 144 potential users, primarily Facebook users, through various online platforms and snowball sampling techniques. Although online surveys are limited to individuals with Internet access, the research focuses on how people use social media as an Internet-enabled tool. The survey respondents were biased towards the middle class and higher population, but this is relevant as only the affluent can afford Internet access. This study aimed to understand how people use social media and its impact on society. The researcher will use interviews, online surveys, and various sources of data including books, journals, research reports, theses, and daily newspaper news. They avoided self-censorship in answering sensitive questions, keeping politically sensitive modules in the latter half of the survey. To counter this limitation, respondents were asked about the experiences of others rather than their own situation.

4. Results and discussions
This result presents the results of the estimated regression model (ordinary least squares), which tests the proposed study hypotheses. This necessarily involves the assessment of the statistical significance of the variables of interest (i.e., p-value $< .05$). The interpretations of the coefficients follow chronologically, starting with hypothesis 1.

4.1 Findings from The Survey

The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 1. The hypotheses were tested using the OLS estimation method and carried out using Stata14 Statistical Software. First, Hypothesis 1, which states that perceived autocratic political climate (reduced *democraticness*) is positively related to self-censorship, is supported (β =-.184, $p <$ .01), as shown in Model 3 of Table 1. By contrast, the democraticness of the political climate is associated with less self-censorship, holding other factors constant. This finding supports extant studies that suggest that authoritarian governance can result in public self-censorship at the national level.

Hypothesis 2 postulates that the constrained freedom of expression is positively related to self-censorship. This assertion is supported (β =.655, $p <$ .05) in Model 3 of Table 1 and implies that controlled freedom of expression partly accounts for the public's self-censorship behavior on social media platforms. Hypothesis 3 posits that the association between social media posts/activity (related to state criticism and corruption) and self-censorship depends on the perceived climate of fear, such that: (1) when the climate of fear is perceived to be low, engaging in social media posts critical of government is associated with low self-censorship (negative relationship); and (2) when the climate of fear is perceived to be high, social media activity/posts critical of the government are positively related to self-censorship. Empirical support exists for the contextual role of the climate of fear (β =-.184, $p <$ .01), which is captured by the interaction term in Model 3 of Table 1. Figure 1 illustrates the simple effects (slopes) for the high and low values of the moderator variable.

Table 1. Regression results: factors associated with self-censorship

	Outcome variable: Self-Censorship		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Democraticness (cf. autocratic)		-0.194** (-3.17)	-0.184** (-2.86)
Freedom of Express (suppressed)		0.598* (2.14)	0.655* (2.32)
Government Action			0.0115 (0.15)
Climate of Fear			-0.216 (-1.79)
Critical Post (state, corruption, etc.)			-0.172 (-0.82)
Climate of Fear X Critical Post			0.109* (2.06)
Gender (female = 1, male =0)	-0.681 (-1.64)	-0.200 (-0.48)	-0.0725 (-0.17)
Birth year	0.00591* (2.53)	0.00478* (2.13)	0.00375 (1.62)
Education (base group: no education)			

Read & write but no formal education	3.026 (1.15)	3.259 (1.29)	3.184 (1.26)
Secondary level (9-10)	7.666*** (3.41)	6.933***	6.646***
Higher secondary level (11-12)	5.915**	5.401**	5.413**
Graduate degree	5.604**	5.091**	4.932**
Master's degree or higher	5.962*** (3.41)	5.159** (3.04)	5.032** (2.93)
Profession (intentionally omitted)	-	-	-
Monthly Income (intentionally omitted)	-	-	-
Intercept	-11.28* (-2.37)	-10.52* (-2.29)	-8.377 (-1.77)
N	144	144	144
R^2	.30	.38	.40

The t-statistics are in parentheses. See appendix 1 for complete results table

$^{*} p < 0.05,$ $^{**} p < 0.01,$ $^{***} p < 0.001$

The table presents the results of the three regression models, possibly examining the factors influencing self-censorship or a related dependent variable. Each model included different predictors to analyze their effects. A detailed analysis of each model and the predictors is as follows.

4.1 Analysis Table
4.1.1 Understanding the Table
1. **Coefficients (B-values):** These represent the effect size of each predictor on the dependent variable. A positive coefficient indicates a positive relationship, whereas a negative coefficient indicates a negative relationship.
2. **T-statistics (in parentheses):** These indicate the statistical significance of the coefficients. A higher absolute t-value suggests a more significant predictor.
3. **Significance Levels:** The symbols next to the coefficients indicate the significance levels.
   o ***p < .05**: Statistically significant.
   o ****p < .01**: Highly significant.
   o *****p < .001**: Very highly significant.

4.1.2 Model Analysis
Model 1
1. **Democracy (cf. Autocratic)**
   a. Coefficient: Not provided.
   b. This indicates the effect of moving from an autocratic to a more democratic perspective.
   c. Not included in model 1.
2. **Sex (female = 1, male = 0)**

a. Coefficient: -0.681
b. T-value: (-1.64) (not statistically significant).
c. This suggests that females are less likely to exhibit the outcome (possibly self-censorship or another variable), but the effect is not significant.

3. **Birth Year:**
a. Coefficient: 0.00591*
b. T-value: (2.53) (significant at $p < .05$).
c. This indicates that older birth years (younger individuals) were slightly associated with a higher level of the dependent variable.

4. **Education (Base Group: No Education).**
a. **Read and Write but No Formal Education:** Coefficient: 3.026, T-value: (1.15) (not significant).
b. **Secondary Level (9-10):** Coefficient: 7.666***, T-value: (3.41) (very highly significant).
c. **Higher Secondary Level (11-12):** Coefficient: 5.915**, T-value: (3.32) (highly significant).
d. **Graduate Degree:** Coefficient: 5.604**, T-value: (3.24) (highly significant).
e. Higher educational levels were significantly associated with increased levels of the dependent variable.

Model 2
1. **Democracy (cf. Autocratic)**
a. Coefficient: -0.194**
b. T-value: (-3.17) (highly significant).
c. This indicates that as perceptions become more democratic (as opposed to autocratic), the dependent variable decreases.

2. **Freedom of Expression (Suppressed)**
a. Coefficient: 0.598*
b. T-value: (2.14) (significant at $p < .05$).
c. This suggests that suppressed freedom of expression was positively associated with the dependent variable.

3. **Gender:**
a. Coefficient: -0.200
b. T-value: (-0.48) (not statistically significant).

4. **Birth Year:**
a. Coefficient: 0.00478*
b. T-value: (2.13) (significant at $p < .05$).

5. **Education (Base Group: No Education).**
a. **Read and Write but No Formal Education:** Coefficient: 3.259, T-value: (1.29) (not significant).
b. **Secondary Level (9-10):** Coefficient: 6.933**, T-value: (3.19) (highly significant).
c. **Higher Secondary Level (11-12):** Coefficient: 5.401**, T-value: (3.14) (highly significant).
d. **Graduate Degree:** Coefficient: 5.091**, T-value: (3.05) (highly significant).

Model 3
1. **Democracy (cf. Autocratic)**
a. Coefficient: -0.184**
b. T-value: (-2.86) (highly significant).
c. The effect size slightly decreased but remained significant.

2. **Freedom of Expression (Suppressed)**
a. Coefficient: 0.655*
b. T-value: (2.32) (significant at $p < .05$).
c. This effect increased slightly and remained significant.

3. **Government Action:**
a. Coefficient: 0.0115
b. T-value: (0.15) (not significant).
c. Minimal to no effect on dependent variable.

4. **Climate of Fear:**
   a. Coefficient: -0.216
   b. T-value: (-1.79) (approaching significance but not below 0.05).
   c. This indicates a potentially negative relationship, although not significant at conventional levels.
5. **Critical Post (State, Corruption, etc..)**
   a. Coefficient: -0.172
   b. T-value: (-0.82) (not significant).
   c. No significant effect was observed on the dependent variable.
6. **Climate of fear × critical post**
   a. Coefficient: 0.109*
   b. T-value: (2.06) (significant at $p < .05$).
   c. Indicates a significant interaction effect between "Climate of Fear" and "Critical Post," suggesting that the combined effect of these variables is significant.
7. **Gender:**
   a. Coefficient: -0.0725
   b. T-value: (-0.17) (not statistically significant).
8. **Birth Year:**
   a. Coefficient: 0.00375
   b. T-value: (1.62) (not statistically significant).
9. **Education (Base Group: No Education).**
   a. **Read and Write but No Formal Education:** Coefficient: 3.184, T-value: (1.26) (not significant).
   b. **Secondary Level (9-10):** Coefficient: 6.646**, T-value: (3.02) (highly significant).
   c. **Higher Secondary Level (11-12):** Coefficient: 5.413**, T-value: (3.10) (highly significant).
   d. **Graduate Degree:** Coefficient: 4.932**, T-value: (2.91) (highly significant).

Overall Analysis:
1. **Consistent Findings:**
   a. **Democracy (cf. autocratic)** consistently shows a negative and significant relationship across Models 2 and 3, suggesting that higher democratic perceptions reduce the dependent variable.
   b. **Freedom of Expression (Suppressed)** is a significant predictor in Models 2 and 3, indicating a positive association with the dependent variable.
   c. **Education Level** consistently shows significant positive relationships with the dependent variable, especially at the secondary and higher levels.
2. **Model Adjustments:**
   a. Model 3 introduces interaction terms and additional variables like "Climate of Fear" and "Critical Post," revealing nuanced relationships and interaction effects.
   b. The interaction between "Climate of Fear" and "Critical Post was significant, indicating that the combined effect of these variables significantly impacted the dependent variable.
3. **Insignificant Predictors**
   a. **Gender** and **government actions** showed no significant impact in any model.
   b. **Critical Post** alone does not show a significant effect, but its interaction with "Climate of Fear" does.

4.2 Critical Post/Activity on Social Media
This refers to the activities of respondents on social media that are critical of the state, public administration, and corruption. The nature of such posts/activity is measured on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from not at all=1 to regularly=5) on issues about "criticism of government actions/policy," "government corruption" and "public services" public services. Cronbach's alpha value was 0.76.

4.3 Control Variables
Control variables are widely used in empirical research to rule out alternative explanations and improve causal inferences (Klarmann and Feurer 2018). They are particularly important in non-randomized

studies to account for confounding, moderating, or mediating factors (Schjoedt & Sangboon, 2015). However, its use and interpretation are problematic. Researchers often struggle to select, analyze, and report control variables effectively (Klarmann & Feurer, 2018). Some scholars argue that the estimated effects of control variables themselves are unlikely to have causal interpretations and recommend focusing solely on the variables of interest in the results sections (Hünermund & Louw, 2023). Best practices for control variable use include providing detailed theoretical rationale, measurement information, and justification for inclusion in the analyses (Atinc et al., 2012). Recent research has also suggested that removing control variables may be valuable in many cases. Despite the increasing number of best-practice recommendations, there is still a lag in researchers following these guidelines (Atinc et al., 2012).

Grounded in past studies, theory, and reviews, as discussed in Chapter two about the choice of control variables. Therefore, the thesis analysis was controlled for:
1. Gender accounts for any sex-specific differences among respondents that can impact self-censorship.
2. Education Levels to account for differences in perceived understanding and knowledge about self-censorship
3. Age to account for respondent-specific differences that occur over the course of one's growth. It includes life experiences and life events such as arrests and civil unrest, impacting one's attitudes and behavior towards self-censorship.
4. Income Level, to account for differences in income-specific effects among respondents, might affect their use of social media and self-censorship.
5. Profession (Public sector, private sector, self-employed and unemployed): controls for professional affiliations or job differences that might affect an individual's self- censorship
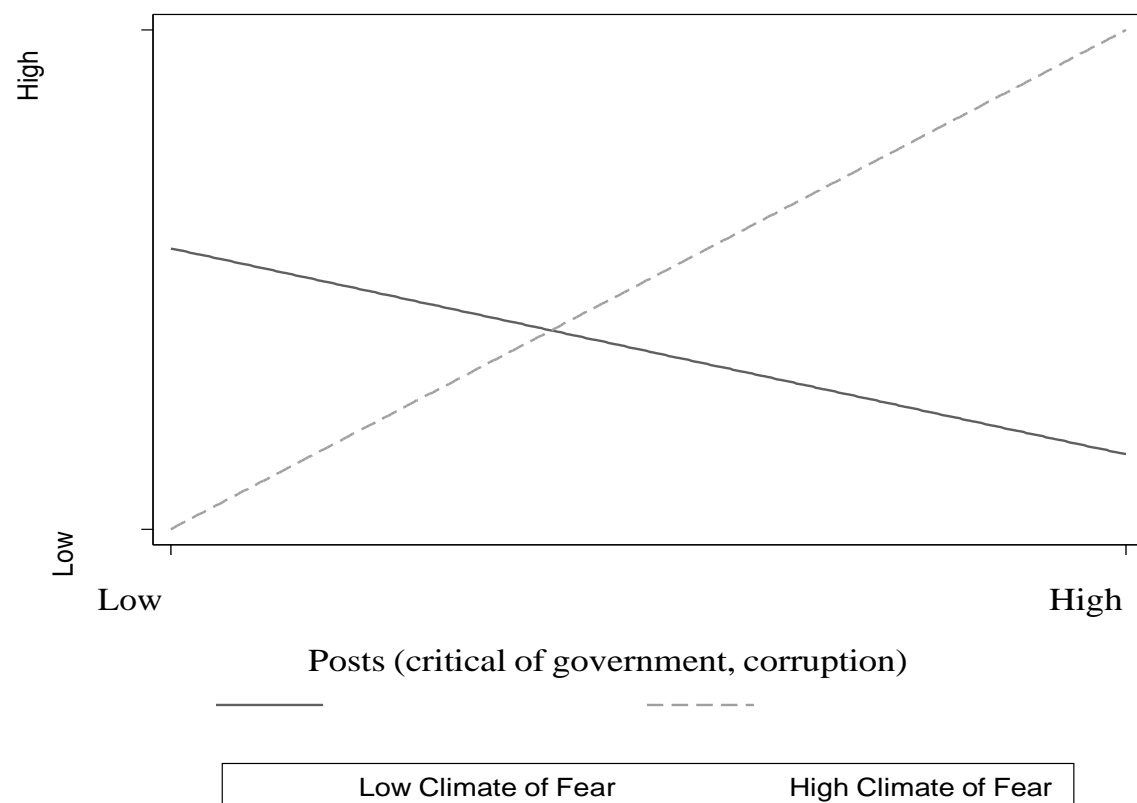

Figure 2. Moderating effect of "Climate of fear" on the relationship between "Critical nature of posts about government" and self-censorship

From the above figure, the slope of the association between critical posts/activity and self-censorship is positive among the public who perceive a high climate of fear just a posed to the

negative slope for the relationship among persons perceiving a low climate of fear. As such, perceptions about the climate of fear in the form of arrests, imprisonments, and blacklisting shape the public's behavior towards self-censorship, as it relates to engaging in posts that are critical of the government.

4.4 Scale Aggregation

All scales used in this thesis were aggregated to form variables after assessments were deemed acceptable based on the scale's factorability and internal consistency (i.e., Cronbach's alpha). The appropriateness of aggregation was assumed if Bartlett's test for sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of the sampling adequacy criterion were satisfied. As shown in Table 2, the scales' KMO values exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.6, and the p-values of the Bartlett's tests are statistically significant at the 95% level. This suggests that scale items are sufficiently correlated and that a data reduction technique, such as data aggregation, is appropriate. Hence, the variables were generated as the average of the scale items.

Table 2. Test of Construct Factorability: Basis for Data Reduction/Aggregation

Variable/construct	Sampling adequacy	Bartlett test o	f sphericity	
	KMO	Chi-Square	Df	p-value
Democraticness	.500	136.961	1	.000
Freedom of Expression (controlled)	.705	118.153	6	.000
Government Action	.584	126.296	3	.000
Self-Censorship	.709	157.926	3	.000
Climate of Fear	.814	363.093	6	.000
Critical Post	.689	110.490	3	.000

Analysis Table

Bartlett's test of sphericity examined whether the variables were significantly correlated in the dataset. If the p-value is less than 0.05, it indicates that there are correlations in the dataset that are appropriate for factor analysis.

For all variables:
1. Chi-Square, Degrees of Freedom (df), and p-values:
   a. Democraticness: Chi-Square = 136.961, df = 1, p-value = .000
   b. Freedom of Expression (Controlled): Chi-Square = 118.153, df = 6, p-value = .000
   c. Government Action: Chi-Square = 126.296, df = 3, p-value = .000
   d. Self-Censorship: Chi-Square = 157.926, df = 3, p-value = .000
   e. Climate of Fear: Chi-Square = 363.093, df = 6, p-value = .000
   f. Critical Post: Chi-Square = 110.490, df = 3, p-value = .000
2. Interpretation: For all variables, the p-values are .000 (less than 0.05), which means that the test is statistically significant. This indicates that the variables have significant correlations and that factor analysis is appropriate for these variables.

Overall Analysis
1. KMO Measures: Most of the variables have a KMO value that suggests an adequate level of sampling adequacy, with "Climate of Fear" showing the highest suitability for factor analysis.
2. Bartlett's Test: All variables show significant results (p < .05) on Bartlett's test of sphericity, suggesting that there are significant correlations between the items of each construct.

In conclusion, the data appears generally suitable for factor analysis, especially for the constructs like "Climate of Fear," which has high sampling adequacy. Constructs like "Democraticness" should be approached with caution due to their lower KMO values, indicating less sampling adequacy.

The descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviations and bivariate correlations, are reported in Table 3 based on a final sample size of 144.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics, Including, Mean and Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations

	Descriptive statistics			Bivariate correlations					
	N	Mean	S.D.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Self-Censorship (1)	144	5.75	2.26	1					
Democraticness (2)	144	3.08	2.86	-0.17*	1				
Freedom of Expression (controlled) (3)	144	3.32	0.68	0.33*	-0.07	1			
Government Intervention (4)	144	4.65	2.57	-0.03	0.36*	0.01	1		
Climate of Fear (5)	144	2.80	2.94	-0.05	0.24*	-0.03	0.52*	1	
Critical Post (6)	144	1.47	1.05	0.07	-0.02	0.15	-0.04	0.18*	1

Analysis Table:
Bivariate Correlations:
1. **Self-Censorship and Democraticness:** The correlation coefficient was **-0.17**, indicating a weak negative correlation. This suggests that, as the perception of democraticness increases, self-censorship tends to decrease, although the relationship is weak. Asterisk (*) indicates that this correlation is statistically significant.
2. **Self-Censorship and Freedom of Expression (controlled):** The correlation coefficient was **0.33**, indicating a moderately positive correlation. This suggests that higher levels of self-censorship are associated with higher perceived restrictions on freedom of expression, and that this relationship is statistically significant (*).
3. **Self-Censorship and Government Intervention:** The correlation coefficient was **-0.03**, indicating

almost no correlation. This finding suggests that government intervention does not have a meaningful direct correlation with self-censorship.

4. **Democracy and Government Intervention:** The correlation coefficient was **0.36**, indicating a moderate positive correlation. This suggests that as perceptions of democracy increase, perceptions of government intervention also increase, and this correlation is statistically significant (as indicated by *).

5. **Democracy and Freedom of Expression (controlled):** The correlation coefficient was -0.07, indicating a very weak negative correlation. This suggests that perceptions of democraticness are slightly inversely related to perceived freedom of expression, although the relationship is not statistically significant (no *).

4.5 Findings from The Interview

The study reveals that self-censorship in Bangladesh stems from the country's political climate and fear of the ruling government. The nation endured severe repression and ballot box stuffing, resulting in a one-party system with limited freedom of speech. The autocratic nature of the government, along with regulations such as the amended ICT Act of 2013 and the Digital Security Act, has created an environment in which individuals feel unsafe posting on social media platforms. The government has become increasingly intolerant of dissenting voices and has intensified its crackdowns on public discourse and criticism. Journalists face harassment that disrupts their work and are often charged with offenses under oppressive laws. The government has issued licenses to several television stations, effectively transforming them into propaganda tools that align with the government, engage in self-censorship, and operate as independent media. Factors contributing to self-censorship include government interference and religious influence.

As a researcher, I want to give recommendations aimed at increasing support from civil society and the foreign community to enable liberal democracy to find a home in Bangladesh.

a. Increasing support from civil society and foreign communities enables liberal democracy to find a home in Bangladesh.

b. Leading civil society organizations should be equally active in their support for fair elections and the survival of democratic beliefs.

c. Civil society must continue to exert pressure on the regime with regard to fair elections and the ongoing deterioration of democratic institutions, and concern people about self-censorship.

d. Self-censorship in the media is not solely due to pressure from the ruling authorities.

e. Bangladeshi authorities should openly uphold the right to free expression, including criticism and dissent.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the complex relationship between regime structure and self-censorship on social media in Bangladesh, highlighting how political dynamics influence online behavior. Through a thorough analysis of the current political climate, legal frameworks, and social media usage patterns, the following conclusions can be drawn: Bangladesh's political system, characterized by its hybrid regime and a blend of democratic and authoritarian elements, significantly influences the prevalence of self-censorship among social media users. This study finds that the ambiguity inherent in such a regime, where democratic processes coexist with autocratic tendencies, fosters an environment of uncertainty and fear. This climate discourages open expression, prompting individuals to self-censor, particularly when discussing sensitive topics, such as government corruption or state policies. The analysis revealed a strong positive correlation between the perceived climate of fear and the tendency toward self-censorship. In regions or demographics where fear of government retaliation, legal repercussions, or social ostracism is high, individuals are more likely to refrain from posting or sharing content that could be interpreted as critical of the government. Conversely, in areas where this fear is perceived to be lower, self-censorship is less prevalent, indicating a clear link between the regime structure and online expression. A comparative analysis of developed countries in Europe and Asia revealed significant differences in how regime structures influence self-censorship. In more democratic and transparent

environments, self-censorship is notably lower, even when citizens criticize the government online. This comparison emphasizes the importance of strong legal protection for freedom of expression and a transparent governance model for reducing self-censorship.

5.1 Economic and Social Implications

This study further identifies that the prevalence of self-censorship has significant economic and social implications. In environments where self-censorship is prevalent, public discourse is stifled, leading to a lack of innovation, reduced civic engagement, and decline in overall social trust. Economically, this can result in slower growth in the digital economy because fear-driven self-censorship hampers the free exchange of ideas and obstructs the development of a vibrant online marketplace. To address the issue of self-censorship, this study recommends that the Bangladeshi government implement measures to strengthen democratic institutions and safeguard freedom of expression. This includes revising restrictive laws, promoting transparency, and ensuring that citizens feel secure engaging in public discourse without fear of retribution. The development of these policies is crucial for fostering an open and dynamic online environment, which is essential for both social cohesion and economic progress.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the regime structure plays a critical role in shaping self-censorship behavior on social media in Bangladesh. As a country navigates its political landscape, the findings suggest that efforts to enhance democratic practices and reduce the climate of fear are essential for ensuring that social media can serve as a platform for free expression and constructive dialogue. The researcher emphasizes the importance of recognizing that the popularity of social networks can change over time, which may impact their ability to accurately reflect public sentiments. Although Facebook is currently the dominant platform in Bangladesh, it may not always be the most effective measure for understanding public opinion and the dynamics of self-censorship. Given the evolving landscape of social media, the researcher suggests that future studies should focus on other platforms, such as Twitter or emerging social networks. These platforms may provide unique insights into how self-censorship manifests and affects democratic discourse, especially because they cater to diverse user demographics and communication styles. By broadening the scope of research to encompass a diverse range of social media platforms, future studies could offer a more thorough understanding of the influence of self-censorship on public discourse and its implications for the health of democracies in Bangladesh. This approach ensures that research remains relevant and accurately reflects the current trends in social media usage.

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