

# Social media and online political participation: The mediating role of exposure to cross-cutting and like-minded perspectives



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines (1) how social media use (i.e., blogs and social network sites (SNSs)) influences individuals' online political participation; and (2) the mediating role of exposure to political perspectives (i.e., exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting viewpoints) in the relationship between social media use and online political participation. The results show that both blog and SNS use are positively related to online political participation. Most interestingly, exposure to like-minded perspectives mediates the relationship between individuals' blog use and online political participation while exposure to cross-cutting perspectives mediates the relationship between SNS use and participation.

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## 1. Introduction

The growing popularity of social media (e.g., blogs and social network sites) has motivated scholars to explore the roles such media play in everyday life and in a democratic society. Specifically, researchers have asked how these applications affect individuals' social capital, the nature of online communication, and communicative expressions (Ellison et al., 2007; Walther et al., 2009). Evidence suggests that social media use facilitates political participation and engagement in civic activities (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Macafee and Simone, 2012); however, the literature has mainly focused on the direct influence of social media use and less is known about what mediates the relationship between social media use and citizens' participatory activities (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Pasek et al., 2009; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). Previous studies have demonstrated that news media use indirectly influences citizens' participatory behaviors via psychological variables such as political efficacy (e.g., Jung et al., 2011; Shah et al., 2005). What mediating variables tell us is how or why media effects occur (Baron and Kenny, 1986). Hence, if we are to better understand how social media use influences political engagement online, we should identify mediators of social media use and participatory behaviors.

The current study aims to investigate the mediating factors of social media use, in particular the use of blogs and SNSs, on online political participation. It focuses on exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting political points of view. The literature has demonstrated that exposure to like-minded or similar political perspectives contributes to political participation (Dilliplane, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2012). However, many studies have also found a positive relationship between exposure to dissimilar or diverse views and political participation (Kwak et al., 2005; Leighley, 1990; Scheufele et al., 2006, 2004). Others have found that exposure to political difference lowers participation (McClurg, 2006; Mutz, 2002). This line of research could provide insight into how exposure to like-minded as well as cross-cutting perspectives influences relations

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between social media use and political participation. Beyond the direct influence of social media use on citizens' political participation online, this study seeks to contribute to the literature by examining how exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting views mediates the influence of individuals' social media use on online political activities.

This study contends that the relationship between social media, exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting perspectives, and online political participation is likely to depend on the type of social media application. That is, blogs and SNSs like Facebook differently influence the extent to which people are exposed to like-minded or cross-cutting perspectives, and this may impact citizens' political behaviors. Given this, we propose the possibility that pathways to political engagement differ according to the types and characteristics of social media platforms. SNS use is positively related to exposure to cross-cutting viewpoints (Kim, 2011), while blog use is associated with exposure to like-minded viewpoints (Meraz, 2007; Tremayne et al., 2006). Thereby, the use of SNS may influence online political participation through exposure to cross-cutting viewpoints, whereas blogs may influence online political participation through exposure to like-minded viewpoints. By empirically examining and explicating this argument, the current study aims to contribute to the growing literature on the democratic influence of social media.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Online political participation

Political participation refers to activity by ordinary citizens that has the intent or effect of influencing political outcomes such as policies and government action (Verba et al., 1995). The literature has identified several dimensions of traditional forms of political engagement, such as voting, campaign activity, informal activity in local communities, contacting officials, and organizational or collective activities (Verba et al., 1995). A wide range of studies have used these conventional measures of political participation (Brady et al., 1995; McLeod et al., 1999).

Today, however, a new venue of political engagement has emerged in digital media, especially the Internet. Hence, scholars need to consider new forms of political participation separately from traditional forms (Jung et al., 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2012). The Internet makes possible a variety of online political activities such as writing emails to politicians, visiting campaign websites, donating money online, and so forth (Gibson et al., 2005). The Internet has lowered the cost of political participation, helping to level the playing field of political engagement somewhat (Bimber, 2001; Gibson et al., 2005; Quintelier and Vissers, 2008). The literature points out that online participation differs from offline participation in its underlying mechanisms. Although traditional offline participation requires time and civic skills, those resources seem less necessary to participate in an online environment (Best and Krueger, 2005). The Internet dramatically reduces the need to have time to engage in politics; for instance, emailing an elected representative or government official is much quicker and easier than sending her/him a letter (Best and Krueger, 2005; Bimber, 1999). Some research has demonstrated that the antecedents of political behaviors differ between offline and online (e.g., Best and Krueger, 2005). Recent studies have started to examine online political participation separately from traditional forms of offline participation (Jung et al., 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2012). In line with this trend, this study focuses solely on citizens' online political participation.

### 2.2. Blogs and political participation

The popularity of blogging, particularly political blogging, has increased sharply in recent years. (Herring et al., 2007; Tremayne, 2007). Research has demonstrated that blogs positively influence citizens' political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009). One possible reason for this influence is the blog's role as information provider. The blog as an alternative information source—offering viewpoints distinct from mainstream media and providing essential information regarding current events and campaign news (Kaye, 2005)—may have a positive impact on citizens' political participation.

Another possible reason is the role of blogs as a forum for the citizenry, a space for interactive communication between readers and bloggers. Blogs allow for “feedback from readers in the form of comment functions,” and readers who refrain from commenting still “get the sense of being part of an event by reading the live discourse of others” (Tremayne, 2007, p. xiii). It has been demonstrated that interpersonal communication plays a critical role in a citizen's participatory engagement, as presented in the Citizen Communication Mediation Model (see Shah et al., 2005). As such, it is important to note that informational media use and interpersonal communication are key antecedents to a citizen's civic and political engagement. Given that blogs function as both information sources and forums for discussing public affairs, it is plausible that blogging may positively influence citizens' political engagement.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Interpersonal communication may itself constitute political engagement. Indeed, some researchers have conceptualized citizens' communication activities as political participation. For example, Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009) consider respondents' communicative activities, such as commenting on news online and participating in online forums, as expressive participation. In addition, other studies also conceptualize interpersonal discussion as discursive participation activities (Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Nir, 2012). However, a body of literature has conceptualized interpersonal discussion and citizens' participatory behaviors separately; the former refers to informal political conversation among citizens or non-elite members and the latter focuses more on activities that have the intent or effect of influencing policy or government action (Brady, 1999; Jung et al., 2011; McLeod et al., 1999; Shah et al., 2005; Valenzuela et al., 2012). Interpersonal communication has been introduced here to explain why blogging may have a positive influence on participatory engagement online. People in the blogosphere can discuss issues with one another, which should be positively related to political engagement. Likewise, the current study does not measure interpersonal communication behaviors, whether in the blogosphere or face-to-face. The method section below offers more detail on the operationalization of blog use and online political engagement.

Given the literature, it seems hardly surprising that informational uses of digital media have been positively associated with civic and political engagement (Shah et al., 2005). The literature suggests that Internet use emphasizing news and information results in citizens' increased levels of participation in civic and political activities (Moy et al., 2005). New communication technologies such as blogs have made possible the emergence of a new form of networked arena "in the form of interactive online journals, which facilitate information exchange between users" (Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009, p. 906). Indeed, blogs are primarily used for information seeking, opinion expression, and political and social surveillance (Kaye, 2005). Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2009) provided evidence that the use of blogs has a positive influence on increased online political participation. They found that citizens' blogging—reading someone else's blog and creating a blog—has a significant positive relationship with an array of online political activities, including online discussion, campaigning and other forms of political behaviors such as signing petitions or donating money. The use of blogs is generally related to increased information seeking, political expression, or discussion among blog users. Blogs also engender a sense of community by combining information and opportunities for individuals to connect both personally and ideologically (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Kerbel and Bloom, 2005). As past studies have shown a positive relationship between blogging and political participation, this study expects a positive relationship between individuals' blog use and political participation.

**H1.** The use of blogs will be positively related to online political participation.

### 2.3. Social network sites (SNSs) and political participation

Social network sites (SNSs) have been increasingly utilized for political engagement in recent years. This was demonstrated in recent election campaigns, wherein SNSs such as MySpace and Facebook facilitated the recruiting of volunteers and promoting voter registration (Gueorguieva, 2008). According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2008), many people got information about candidates and campaigns in the 2008 U.S. presidential elections through using social networking sites. Not only did users get their news and campaign information from these SNSs during the election, they were also able to post their thoughts and comments, allowing them to play a more active role for citizens in the political process (Smith, 2009). The migration of social networking into the political realm necessitates research into its influence on the democratic process.

At present there exists a research tradition that considers a person's social network to be a key factor in civic and political engagement (e.g., contacting government officials either in person or by phone or letter, attending a meeting for a community issue, and participating in a protest; Lim, 2008). A key proposition in this tradition is that "people participate in political or civic activities because they are asked or encouraged by someone with whom they have a personal connection" (Lim, 2008, p. 961). This encouragement process is usually facilitated by discussion within social networks.

Scholars have long thought that a participatory democracy benefits from political discussion among citizens. Early studies stressed the role of interpersonal communication within the political process (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). Subsequent studies have supported the notion that a citizen's discussion of public affairs leads to political engagement and participation (e.g., McLeod et al., 1999; Wyatt et al., 2000). Of course, citizens talk politics all the time, not just during campaign seasons. This communication process within one's social network can influence one's political attitude by forcing him/her to consider, exchange, and synthesize previously attained political information (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995). One of the central assumptions for this area of research is that interpersonal communication serves a political-learning function (e.g., talking about things happening in the neighborhood). Studies have shown that political knowledge positively affects political participation (e.g., attending a neighborhood meeting, writing a letter to the local editor, and volunteering; McLeod et al., 1999; Neuman, 1986). Accordingly, people who communicate within larger personal networks may become more knowledgeable and thereby more likely to participate in political activities. In other words, the size of the network is positively related to political participation because of the increased likelihood of talking to various people within a broader network. Past research has shown that the amount of discussion—a function of network size and discussion frequency—is consistent in having a positive impact on political participation (Mutz, 2002; Scheufele, 2002).

The relationship between social networks and political participation can thus be extended to online social networking sites. SNSs enable users to meet and communicate with their family, friends, co-workers, and strangers, and in general may expose them to various points of view. They also allow individuals to share news and information and talk to various people within a broadened network, which may in turn lead to increased levels of political behaviors. Based on the literature reviewed above, therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

**H2.** SNS use will be positively related to online political participation.

### 2.4. Exposure to cross-cutting versus like-minded perspectives

The current literature privileges a direct relationship between social media use and participatory behaviors in which blogs and SNS use lead to increased public participation. This study also investigates how exposure to cross-cutting perspectives and like-minded viewpoints influences the relationship between social media use and participation. Past

research has focused primarily on the direct relationship between social media use and individuals' political and civic engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2013; Macafee and Simone, 2012; Park et al., 2009). However, little attention has been devoted to understanding what, if anything, mediates this relationship. Scholars have turned to media effects studies and utilized the indirect effects paradigm, which suggests that media use often has an indirect influence on individuals' attitude and behavior (Cho et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2005). That is, media effects on attitude and behavior are largely indirect through personal-psychological outcomes (e.g., political efficacy) and interpersonal communication behaviors (e.g., political discussion; Jung et al., 2011; McLeod et al., 1999; Shah et al., 2005). The research in this paradigm has demonstrated that identifying the indirect effects or mediators of media use on communication outcome variables helps to clarify the whole communication process. For instance, media use indirectly influences citizens' participatory activities via their activities involving reasoning (e.g., political discussions and online political messaging) as well as through psychological variables (e.g., efficacy and knowledge; Cho et al., 2009; Jung et al., 2011; Shah et al., 2005). Based on this line of research, the current study recognizes the importance of exploring what mediates the influence of social media use on citizens' political engagement. A few studies have broken ground in looking at mediating mechanisms in which social media use leads to citizens' participatory activities. For example, a recent study showed that the effects of overall Facebook use on individuals' protest behavior were mediated by three forms of activities on Facebook: news consumption, expressing one's opinions, and socializing with friends (Valenzuela et al., 2012).

This study posits that the relationship between social media use and online political participation could potentially be mediated by exposure to similar and/or dissimilar perspectives. Indeed, one of the academic debates concerning political participation is whether and how exposure to cross-cutting political views and like-minded perspectives influences individuals' political participation. Studies have shown that exposure to like-minded views is associated with higher levels of political participation (Dilliplane, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2012), but cross-cutting exposure (e.g., having a conversation with people holding opposing views) may discourage political participation because opposing political opinions necessarily contain an element of conflict (Mutz, 2002, 2006). This sort of conflict can lead to holding ambivalent political views and social accountability pressure, which in turn lowers political participation.

However, some studies have demonstrated that exposure to opposing political views, or political heterogeneity, does not always discourage political engagement. Nir (2005) found that individuals' perceived ambivalence within their networks was unrelated to political participation. Scheufele and his colleagues (2004) reported that political heterogeneity promoted individuals' political participation by motivating them to gain political knowledge through consuming news. They considered the influence of social setting (i.e., work, church, and volunteer group) on political participation, showing that an important antecedent of political participation is the social setting or context in which people discuss politics. For instance, having political talks in volunteer groups was positively and directly associated with political participation, but talking politics at church or in work settings mediated participation through the different viewpoints to which individuals were exposed (Scheufele et al., 2006, 2004).

After considering these findings in the literature, this study posits that the interrelationships between social media, exposure to cross-cutting and like-minded perspectives, and political participation are likely to depend on the type of social media. That is, whether and how exposure to cross-cutting and like-minded perspectives influences the relationship between social media use and political engagement may depend upon whether the media is a blog or a social network site.

The existing literature suggests that different social media may have different influences on individuals' exposure to cross-cutting and like-minded perspectives. A recent study found that an individual's social media use had a positive influence on exposure to cross-cutting perspectives online through online political messaging (Kim, 2011). However, because blogs provide space for information-sharing and discussion where people can connect ideologically, it seems plausible that blog use is associated with exposure to like-minded perspectives. Blog users tend to flock together according to their political ideology. Hence, individuals reading a blog can click on "liked" news and be directed to other websites such as traditional news media channels' online outlets and candidates' campaign websites, which would have similar perspectives to the blog's political viewpoints. Indeed, Democratic blog users are less likely to link to Republican blogs and vice versa because "liberals link mostly to liberals and conservatives link mostly to conservatives" (Sunstein, 2007, p. 150; Tremayne et al., 2006). Meraz (2007), who analyzed political discussions posted on Howard Dean's candidate blog, found that blogs were places for supporters to self-organize, endorse the candidate, campaign, and discuss the candidate's image as opposed to a place designed for diverse interpersonal opinion sharing and deliberative democratic conversation. These findings indicate that blogging may have a positive impact on exposure to like-minded viewpoints. If this is the case, cross-cutting exposure and exposure to like-minded perspectives could mediate the effects of social media use on political participation. The question then becomes which kind of exposure (i.e., cross-cutting or like-minded) would mediate what type of social media's (i.e., blogs and SNSs) impact on political engagement. To address this question, this study poses hypotheses regarding the potential mediating role of exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting perspectives.

In summary, the body of literature suggests that the type of perspective or view individuals are exposed to plays a crucial role in mobilizing them. It could be that SNS use influences participation indirectly through exposure to cross-cutting perspectives because individuals' SNS use is positively related to cross-cutting exposure (Kim, 2011). On the other hand, blogging can be associated with exposure to like-minded viewpoints (Meraz, 2007; Tremayne et al., 2006), so it may influence political engagement indirectly via exposure to similar perspectives. This leads us to propose the following hypotheses:

**H3.** Exposure to like-minded perspectives will mediate the relationship between blog use and online political participation.

**H4.** Exposure to cross-cutting perspectives will mediate the relationship between SNS use and online political participation.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data

Data for this study were collected by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, a survey conducted between November 20 and December 4, 2008, by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. Using a random-digit sample of telephone numbers, the survey was conducted through telephone interviews with a sample of 2,254 respondents, 18 and older. The response rate of the survey was 23%. For data quality, we used listwise deletion, yielding a sample of 1041.

#### 3.2. Measures

##### 3.2.1. Blogging and SNS use

The independent variables of this study were blogging and SNS use. Based on the previous literature (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009), blogging was measured by an additive index of four items, tapping into respondents' blogging behaviors during the 2008 Presidential campaign period. The respondents were asked if they had received any news or information about the election from blogs that cover news, politics, or media; had read about someone else's commentary or experiences with the campaign and political issues on a blog; had posted comments, queries or information about the campaign or the elections on their own blog or on the blogs of others; and had shared with others their experiences casting their ballot by commenting on someone else's blog ( $\alpha = .66$ ,  $M = .77$ ,  $SD = .99$ ).<sup>2</sup>

The use of SNS was measured by an additive index compiled from four items gathered by asking the respondents about their manner of use of SNSs. These items aim to tap into the political behaviors that people carry out on SNSs (e.g., Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010). Using the stem "Thinking about what you have done on social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace," participants were asked if they had gotten any campaign or candidate information from these sites, started or joined a political group or group supporting a cause on a social networking site, revealed on a social networking site which presidential candidate they had voted for, and discovered from the sites which presidential candidate their friends had voted for ( $\alpha = .70$ ,  $M = .96$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ).

##### 3.2.2. Online political participation

Based on previous studies (e.g., Jung et al., 2011; Kaufhold et al., 2010; Valenzuela et al., 2012), online political participation was measured by political activity items which tapped into individuals' political activities related to the campaign and the elections on the Internet, and an additive index was constructed by summing the scores from these items. Respondents were asked whether they had performed the following activities on the Internet in the past year: looked for more information online about candidates' positions on the issues or voting records; shared photos, videos, or audio files online that related to the campaign or the elections; forwarded someone else's political commentary or writing to others; forwarded someone else's political audio or video recordings to others; and subscribed to receive campaign or political information through an RSS feed ( $\alpha = .67$ ,  $M = 1.44$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ).<sup>3</sup>

##### 3.2.3. Exposure to cross-cutting and like-minded perspectives

Exposure to cross-cutting and like-minded perspectives was measured by asking respondents to indicate if most of the websites they had visited to get political or campaign information shared their points of view, had no particular point of view, or challenged their point of view. For exposure to like-minded perspectives, respondents who answered that most of the sites they visited represented views similar to their own were coded "1," while other answers were coded "0"

<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire items for blogging in this study are consistent with the measurement of blog use in previous literature (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009). Although the wording of the four items differs slightly from previous literature, it also aims to tap into individuals' political information receiving and political information generation on a blog. Although one may argue that there might be similarity in blog use and political activities online, we find our measures of blogging and online political participation to be conceptually appropriate because the measure of blog use is particularly focused on activities only within blogs, while political engagement online taps into a variety of individual activities related to the campaign and elections on the Internet (general online political behaviors), which is consistent with previous research (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009).

<sup>3</sup> The measurement of online political participation is in line with measurements from the literature (Jung et al., 2011; Kaufhold et al., 2010; Valenzuela et al., 2012). For example, "subscribed to receive campaign or political information through an RSS feed" in this study is closely related to "sign up to follow a politician" in Kaufhold et al.'s study (2010) and "subscribe to a political Listserv" in Valenzuela et al.'s study (2012). The item emphasizes the extent to which people obtain political/campaign information by signing up or subscribing to online information. The Pew Internet & American Life Project also includes other online political participation items that are different from previous literature, such as "shared photos, videos, or audio files online that related to the campaign or the elections," "look for more information online about candidates' positions on the issues or voting records," and "forwarded someone else's political audio or video recordings to others." Although these items do not exactly match with previous studies, they are closely related to online political behaviors (e.g., political information seeking, and expressive behaviors by using online media). Given that the online environment is constantly evolving, the items taken together can provide insight into individuals' basic online political participation. It can also help us understand online political participation in greater detail.

( $M = .44$ ,  $SD = .50$ ). Exposure to cross-cutting viewpoints was dummy-coded “1” if most of the websites respondents visited for news and campaign information challenged their own point of view ( $M = .25$ ,  $SD = .43$ ).

### 3.2.4. Control variables

Included as control variables were the following demographic characteristics: age, gender, education, ethnicity, and income. Also introduced as control variables were party identity (whether participants identified themselves as partisan or independent) and online news use, which was measured by asking, “How often do you go online to get news about the election?” (ranked on a scale from 1 = never to 3 = 3–5 days a week, up to 6 = more than once a day).

## 4. Results

H1 and H2 hypothesized that blogging and SNS use would be positively related to online political participation. Both hypotheses were supported. The results of a SEM show that blogging and SNS use had a significant direct influence on participants’ online political participation (see Fig. 1). Those who demonstrated a greater degree of blog use ( $B = .49$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and SNS use ( $B = .26$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were more likely to participate in political activities online.

Turning to the mediating role of exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting perspectives in influencing online political participation (H3 and H4), we ran a SEM to examine the two mediators simultaneously. In addition to significant direct paths between blogging and online political participation (H1) and SNS use and online political participation (H2), the results show that in the proposed model, both exposure to like-minded perspectives ( $B = .39$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and cross-cutting exposure ( $B = .25$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p < .05$ ) had a significant influence on online political participation. Furthermore, blogging was significantly related to exposure to like-minded perspectives ( $B = .09$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while SNS use was significantly related to exposure to cross-cutting perspectives ( $B = .09$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Although SNS use also significantly affected exposure to like-minded perspectives, the relationship was negative ( $B = -.09$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The model demonstrated that exposure to like-minded perspectives significantly mediated the relationship between blogging and online political participation ( $B = .04$ ,  $p < .01$ ), while exposure to cross-cutting perspectives was a significant mediator in the relationship between SNS use and online political participation ( $B = .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ; see Table 1).

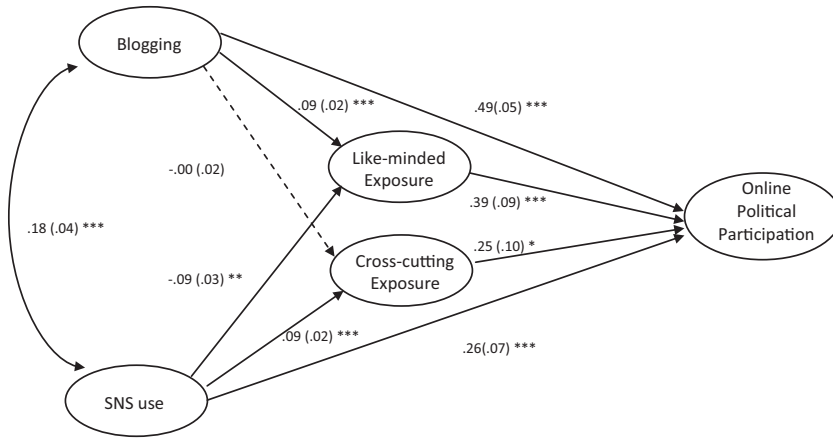
Although it suggested significant relationships supporting our hypotheses, the proposed model did not have a good fit to the data ( $\Delta X^2 = 152.55$  with  $p < .001$  and  $df = 1$ , CFI = .84, TLI = -6.15, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .38). In the revised model, therefore, the nonsignificant paths were excluded, which significantly enhanced the model fit (see Fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> The chi-square statistic ( $\Delta X^2 = 1.28$  with  $p = .53$  and  $df = 2$ ) was not significant, indicating a good model fit. Other fit statistics also supported an adequate model fit for the revised model (CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.02, SRMR = .01, RMSEA = .00). The significant relationships found in the proposed model were sustained in the revised model. Blogging and SNS use were significantly related to online political participation (blogging:  $B = .49$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ; SNS use:  $B = .26$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting perspectives was also positively related to online political participation (like-minded exposure:  $B = .33$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .001$ ; cross-cutting exposure:  $B = .26$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Moreover, blogging was positively associated with exposure to like-minded perspectives ( $B = .07$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while SNS use was positively related to exposure to cross-cutting perspectives ( $B = .05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

For the mediating effect in the revised model, as shown in Table 1, exposure to like-minded perspectives was a significant mediator in the relationship between blogging and online political participation ( $B = .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The mediating effect of exposure to cross-cutting perspectives in the relationship between SNS use and online political participation was found to be marginally significant in the two-tailed test ( $B = .01$ ,  $p < .06$ ). The trend in the relationship, although only marginally significant, suggests that SNS use encourages online political participation by prompting people to expose themselves to cross-cutting perspectives.

## 5. Discussion

This paper aims to understand how social media use (i.e., use of blogs and SNSs) influences a key aspect of the democratic process: citizens’ online political participation. As hypothesized, the findings support the idea that social media use—both blogs and SNSs—contributes to participatory democracy. The results of the study confirmed a positive relationship between the use of blogs and SNSs and respondents’ online political participation, even after controlling for age, gender, education, ethnicity, income, partisanship, and online news consumption. These results are consistent with previous studies showing that use of such social media as blogs and SNSs has a positive influence on citizens’ participatory behaviors (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Macafee and Simone, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2012). As a space where citizens share information and discuss public affairs, blogs and SNSs can serve as a resource for engaging in political activities. In short, social media platforms play a positive role and provide a useful venue to reinvigorate participatory democracy (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2013).

<sup>4</sup> After removing the insignificant path between blogging and exposure to cross-cutting perspectives, the negative relationship between SNS use and exposure to like-minded perspective became insignificant; therefore, the path was removed in the revised model.

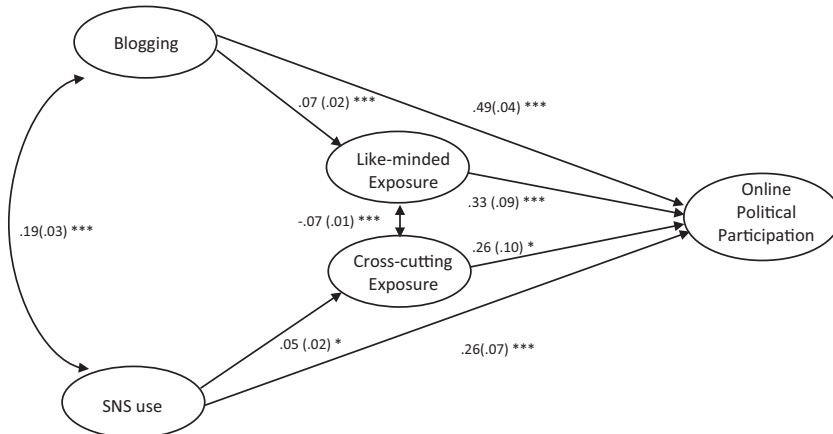


**Fig. 1.** Results for the test of the proposed model. Note: path entries are unstandardized Coefficient (SE). Sample size = 1041. Control variables include age, gender, education, race, income, party identification, and online news use. Goodness of fit: Chi-square = 152.55,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .38; CFI = .84; TLI = -6.15; SRMR = .04. The variables included in this analysis accounted for 38.0% of the variance in online political participation, 11.4% of the variance in exposure to likeminded perspectives, and 4.7% of the variance in exposure to cross-cutting perspectives.  $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 1**  
Indirect effects of structural equation model analyses provided by MPLus.

				B	
<i>Proposed model</i>					
Blogging	→	Like-minded exposure	→	Online political participation	.04***
SNS use	→	Cross-cutting exposure	→	Online political participation	.02**
<i>Revised model</i>					
Blogging	→	Like-minded exposure	→	Online political participation	.02**
SNS use	→	Cross-cutting exposure	→	Online political participation	.01*

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients are reported. \* $p < .06$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ . Mplus employs Delta method to calculate indirect effects.



**Fig. 2.** Results for the test of the revised model. Note: Path entries are unstandardized Coefficient (SE); Sample size = 1041. Control variables include age, gender, education, race, income, party identification, and online news use. Goodness of fit: Chi-square = 1.28,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .53$ ; RMSEA = .00; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.02; SRMR = .01.  $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . The variables included in this analysis accounted for 37.9% of the variance in online political participation, 9.3% of the variance in exposure to likeminded perspective, and 2.1% of the variance in exposure to cross-cutting perspectives.

More importantly, beyond the direct relationships between the use of blogs and SNSs and citizens' participatory behaviors online, the current study explores the mediating role in such relationships of exposure to political perspectives (i.e., the extent to which individuals are exposed to like-minded and cross-cutting viewpoints). That is, this study also explores the role of exposure to political perspectives in the relationship of social media use and online political participation. This investigation seeks to shed light on an important question: Why does the use of blogs and SNSs seem to have a positive influence

on citizens' participatory behaviors? It seeks to understand the underlying mechanisms by which social media use leads to greater levels of political activity online. The results of this study suggest that we should consider the mechanism of exposure to political views in different types of social media when understanding the contribution of social media to political participation.

Our findings have shown that exposure to similar perspectives is a mediator of individuals' blog use and political participation, whereas exposure to cross-cutting perspectives mediates the relationship between SNS use and participatory behaviors online. SNS use was linked to exposure to cross-cutting perspectives that in turn resulted in higher levels of political engagement online. With regard to the relationships between blog use, exposure to political perspectives, and participatory behaviors, results showed that blog use was associated with exposure to like-minded perspectives, which ultimately led to higher levels of online political participation. In other words, the results suggest that blog use has a direct effect on online political participation and an indirect effect on online political participation through exposure to like-minded perspectives. On the other hand, SNS use itself has a direct effect on online political participation and an indirect effect through exposure to dissimilar perspectives. These results suggest that the interrelationships between social media, cross-cutting exposure, exposure to like-minded perspectives, and political participation may depend on the type of social media platforms. That is, whether and how exposure to cross-cutting and like-minded perspectives influences the relationship between social media use and political engagement may depend on the type of social media—blogs or SNSs.

Although some previous research suggests that cross-cutting exposure discourages political participation (e.g., [Mutz, 2002](#)), our findings suggest a positive role of cross-cutting exposure online on political participation which is consistent with some other research that demonstrated a positive influence of exposure to dissimilar or heterogeneous networks on participatory behaviors ([Kim and Chen, 2015](#); [Scheufele et al., 2006, 2004](#)). However, it is worth noting that compared with the positive effect of SNS use on online political participation through cross-cutting exposure, blogging has a stronger effect on online political participation through like-minded exposure. As the revised model presented, the coefficients and significance level demonstrated that the relationship between blogging and like-minded exposure was more significant than the relationship between SNS use and cross-cutting exposure. In addition, the relationship between like-minded exposure and online political participation was stronger than the relationship between cross-cutting exposure and online political participation. Although blogs serve as an alternative information source and discussion forum, the results suggest that people use them mainly to expose themselves to like-minded information and connect to websites with similar political ideology. In this case, the like-minded information significantly promotes political participation. The findings indicate that social media platforms such as blogs that facilitate interactions with politically similar people may have a stronger effect on citizens' engagement in politics than platforms that increase exposure to diverse perspectives by reinforcing individuals' preexisting views, which in turn leads to more extreme attitudes and stronger motivations for political activity ([Lavine et al., 2000](#)). The difference between the paths from SNS use and blogging to online political participation signifies that even though SNS use and cross-cutting exposure encourage political participation, blogging and like-minded exposure still play stronger roles in influencing political participation. While our findings provide evidence of the positive influence of SNS use on online political participation via cross-cutting exposure, we should recognize that the effect is smaller than the effect of blogging on participation through like-minded exposure.

We have illustrated how the relationships between the use of social media and citizens' participatory behaviors online are mediated by exposure to disparate political viewpoints. As such, our findings expand the literature on the direct influence of social media on democratic outcomes. In addition, while a body of research has focused on the effect of exposure to political viewpoints on citizens' participatory behaviors ([Mutz, 2002](#); [Valenzuela et al., 2012](#)), no research to date has linked exposure to political perspectives as an underlying mechanism or mediating variable in the relationship between social media use and political engagement. What we have come to know about the relationship between social media use and individuals' political participation is that the use of blogs and SNSs may contribute to participatory activities online through exposure to like-minded and dissimilar points of view.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that there are various pathways to political engagement, from blogging to political participation through exposure to like-minded perspectives and from SNS use to participation via exposure to cross-cutting perspectives. This study, in particular, counters the notion that exposure to cross-cutting perspectives may lower citizens' participatory activities ([Mutz, 2002](#)); rather it could well offer a path to a stronger and more active citizenship, especially when it is facilitated through SNS use. It may be that by making users learn more about public affairs through exposure to diverse and cross-cutting perspectives, SNS use via cross-cutting exposure can create opportunities for political engagement in the online realm ([Gutmann and Thompson, 1996](#); [McPhee et al., 1963](#)).

Despite the new insights this study provides, the study has some limitations. Because of the cross-sectional data analyzed, we could not be fully confident in the cause-effect relationships between social media use and the dependent variable, political participation. Another limitation is that we relied on respondents' self-reports, not on actual measurements. An experimental setting would enable us to measure participants' actual site-hits, which we could operationalize as exposure to political views. To overcome these limitations, researchers in future studies should consider analyzing panel data and using experimental designs. Another social medium, Twitter, could also be analyzed in this line of research.

This study identified exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting viewpoints as important mediating variables connecting social media use to political participation online. However, there could be other mechanisms underlying the impact of social media use on participatory activities (aside from exposure to similar and dissimilar perspectives). As demonstrated by



previous studies (Cho et al., 2009; Jung et al., 2011; Shah et al., 2007), these could include individuals' reasoning behaviors such as interpersonal discussion and political efficacy. This, of course, could also be explored in future research.

In addition, interpretations of the magnitude of findings should be tempered because statistically significant relationships are not necessarily associated with substantive impact (Kenski, 2003). Given the small effect sizes, we should be cautious in arguing that cross-cutting and like-minded perspectives play a substantive role in mediating the relationship between social media and online political participation. Although statistical significances were found, it should be noted that they were not large. This may be due to the somewhat low reliability scores for the measures of SNS/blog use and overly simplistic measures of exposure to political perspectives. Future researchers should consider including more items in their composite index of exposure to political difference/similarity in order to achieve more robust results (see e.g., Eveland and Hively, 2009; Kim and Chen, 2015). We should also acknowledge that when the data used in this study were collected in 2008, social media were not as widely used as they have become today (2015) and people did not use social media use for news and information about campaign as much as they do today. In particular, given that more and more people are getting news and political information via social media platforms either by actively seeking out political news or accidentally in the mix of posts shared by those in their news feed, serendipitous or incidental exposure to political difference/similarity is becoming an emerging phenomenon in the social media environment (Pew Research Center, 2014). Therefore, future studies can extend the findings of the current study by exploring how social media use today is associated with exposure to political views that differ from or are similar to one's own as well as its attitudinal and behavioral consequences.

On a similar note, although there may be other factors at work in influencing individuals' political activities online, by employing secondary survey data, we are constrained by the available measures. For example, there are no measures available to assess an individual's political knowledge and interest. Although we take into account a host of control variables, including age, gender, education, ethnicity, income, partisanship, and news media use, there are certainly other variables that can influence citizens' participatory activities such as political interest and knowledge (e.g., Matthes, 2013). Consequently, to have more stringent statistical analyses, future researchers should include more control variables (such as political interest and knowledge). With regard to the role of political knowledge and interest, those variables could also be incorporated to investigate unanswered questions that future researchers might pursue. For instance, exposure to like-minded viewpoints may lead to greater levels of political activity by increasing an individual's political interest (Dilliplane, 2011; Stroud, 2011), while exposure to challenging information could increase individuals' thinking about politics, which may in turn lead to more informed citizens (Eveland, 2004; Price et al., 2002). Therefore, in addition to the potential control variables, political interest and knowledge could be examined in future research as mediators in the relationship between individuals' exposure to political viewpoints and participatory behaviors. Furthermore, there could be other mediating mechanisms underlying the impact of social media use on participatory activities, such as individuals' interpersonal communication behaviors and political efficacy (Cho et al., 2009; Jung et al., 2011; Shah et al., 2007). This, of course, could also be explored in future research.

Despite the limitations, this study offers new empirical evidence that certain patterns of exposure to political perspectives may play an important role in the relationship between use of social media platforms and political activity online. It also contributes to social media research. Given the growing popularity and penetration of social media and the way it influences our everyday and public lives, this study adds to our understanding of how and why social media use may function in motivating citizens to engage in online political activities. This study expands the current literature on the effects of social media on citizens' participatory activities by explicating underlying mechanisms in which individuals' exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting perspectives mediate the association between social media use and political participation online. The findings of the present research certainly encourage future studies to expand our understanding of how social media influences citizens' participatory activities.

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