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Cross-cutting and Like-minded Discussion on Social Media: The Moderating Role of Issue Importance in the (De)mobilizing Effect of Political Discussion on Political Participation

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ABSTRACT

Using a student survey with multistage probability sampling in Taiwan, we revisited the deliberation-participation paradox by examining the relationship between cross-cutting/like-minded discussion and online political participation, emphasizing the moderating role of issue importance and focusing particularly on the social media context and two political issues in Taiwan. We found that political ambivalence, which has been proposed as the underlying mechanism between cross-cutting exposure and participation, plays a significant mediating role. Cross-cutting discussion demobilizes participation indirectly through increasing political ambivalence, while like-minded discussion mobilizes participation indirectly through decreasing political ambivalence. More importantly, the two indirect effects are conditioned upon the level of issue importance in that the demobilizing effect of cross-cutting discussion was weakened while the mobilizing effect of like-minded discussion was strengthened when the level of issue importance increased.

The role of social media in citizens' civic and political life has been of great interest due to the exponential growth of social media use. The number of Facebook users exceeds 2.7 billion worldwide, with the largest user segment in the Asia Pacific region (Hootsuite, 2020). The development of social media platforms has provided younger generations with new ways to engage in

politics. For instance, social media facilitate young adults' involvement in election campaigns by allowing them to share campaign information, express support for government policies or candidates, and exchange political views (Yamamoto et al., 2015). Social media also provide young adults a space to discuss and participate in politics (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Chan et al., 2017). By connecting people through their social relationships, social media play a significant role in affecting political behaviors and prompting opportunities to be exposed to diverse and disagreeing political views (Barnidge, 2017; Lu, 2019).

A growing body of scholarship has documented a positive relationship between social media use and political engagement in different political and cultural contexts (Boulianne, 2015; Chan et al., 2017; Chen, 2019); however, research is still lacking on political discussion on social media, in particular when the discussion is considered cross-cutting or like-minded, and how these types of discussion relate to political participation. Scholars have strived to examine political discussion, especially cross-cutting political conversation, for its effect on deliberative and participatory democracy (Barnidge, 2017; Kim & Chen, 2016; Lee et al., 2015; Mutz, 2002). In her seminal work on cross-cutting political discussion, Mutz (2002) found that political disagreement, which is a core component of deliberative discussion, can discourage citizens from participating in politics, suggesting a deliberation-participation paradox. However, subsequent studies have not yet settled the question of whether cross-cutting exposure positively or negatively affects participation (Matthes et al., 2019).

We intend to extend the existing literature in several ways. First, we examine the theoretical links between two different types of political conversation on social media (i.e., cross-cutting and like-minded discussions) and online political participation by revisiting political ambivalence as the underlying mechanism. In their recent meta-analysis of 48 empirical studies, Matthes et al. (2019) documented that there is no significant relationship between cross-cutting exposure and political participation but noted that prior research has primarily examined the direct (or total) relationship and suggested systematically investigating potential mediating paths because the relationship can be indirect. Accordingly, we revisit the explanation of political ambivalence raised by Mutz (2002). Scholars have strived to understand what conditions increase conflicting attitudes and what consequences these may have for the development of democracy (Hmielowski et al., 2017; Kim & Hyun, 2017; Priester & Petty, 1996). Ideally, ambivalent attitudes should make individuals ponder on the subjects, seek out information, and rely less on cognitive shortcuts when making political decisions (Basinger & Lavine, 2005; Rudolph & Popp, 2007). This would lead people to act as deliberately engaged citizens. However, studies have shown that ambivalent attitudes can prompt the internalization of competing arguments, leading to

political disengagement (Levendusky, 2013; Matthes, 2012). This study aims to build on this line of research by revisiting the relationship in the context of political discussion on social media. Furthermore, instead of examining cross-cutting discussion only, we propose that different types of political discussion on social media are likely to affect political ambivalence toward political issues differently and thus either promote or depress political participation.

Second, we examine this relationship in Taiwan, a well-established democratic society, where the active social media user penetration is the highest in the Asia-Pacific region at 89% (Statista, 2019) and young adults actively participate in politics. According to the Central Election Commissions (2020), among the voters in the 2020 Taiwanese presidential election, 16.2% were 20 to 29 years old, 18.4% were 30 to 39 years old, and 19.4% were 40 to 49 years old. Young adults also had a high voting rate (around 16.5%) in the 2018 Taiwanese Referendum in which citizens voted on several questions related to different political and social issues, such as the environment, international status, education, and same-sex marriage (Central Election Commissions, 2018). Our empirical findings will help to extend the literature to the Asian context and shed light on the role of young adults in the development of deliberative and participatory democracy in the social media era.

Third, this study explores the moderating role of issue importance in the indirect effect of cross-cutting/like-minded discussion on participation through political ambivalence toward the issue by focusing on two political issues in Taiwan: international status and labor rights. These two issues are controversial in light of two major events. For the issue of international status, there was a proposal in the 2018 referendum to change the name of the 2020 Olympic team to "Taiwan" from the current name "Chinese Taipei". The proposal was rejected. For the issue of labor rights, the pilots of China Airlines, Taiwan's biggest carrier, held a seven-day strike in February 2019 to demand better working conditions. The Pilots Union and China Airlines eventually reached an agreement, but the strike received great attention from news media and the public and raised public awareness of workers' rights to collective action and the current policy of protecting labor rights. There was also a widespread debate in the public, with some people supporting the strike while others did not as the strike led to the cancellation of more than 200 flights and affected travel schedules among more than 20,000 people during the Chinese New Year holiday (Sun, 2019). We argue that considering an issue personally important could counteract the indirect demobilizing effect of cross-cutting discussion on political participation as it could mitigate the effect of cross-cutting discussion on political ambivalence toward the issue.

Considering the roles of issue importance and political ambivalence toward the issues in the relationship between political discussion and participation, the moderated mediation models provide insight into the conditions and mechanisms under which cross-cutting and like-minded discussion on social media fosters or mitigates participation. The models also help to place the relationship in an issue-specific context when citizens consider an issue personally important.

Cross-Cutting and Like-Minded Political Discussion, Political Ambivalence, and Participation

Scholars have long debated the effects of exposure to cross-cutting perspectives on the development of a healthy democratic society. Exposure to cross-cutting perspectives, referring to encountering disagreement and opposing viewpoints, plays an essential role in contributing to deliberative democracy as it encourages people to take diverse perspectives into consideration, and the process of deliberating should reduce biases (e.g., preexisting stereotypes which are strongly held) and enhance respect for differences of opinion (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). However, cross-cutting exposure can depress people's participation in politics (Dilliplane, 2011).

The demobilizing effect of cross-cutting exposure can be traced back to the concept of "cross-pressures" in *The People's Choice*, in which Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) suggested that the conflicts and inconsistencies among the factors influencing an individual's vote decision discouraged voters from becoming involved in a campaign. Subsequent studies, however, did not find consistent results regarding the detrimental effects of cross-pressures on political participation. For instance, some studies found that perceived disagreement within discussion networks did not discourage voting turnout (Huckfeldt et al., 2004), and some others even documented positive effects of heterogeneous discussion networks on various forms of participation (Lee et al., 2015).

More recently, a meta-analysis of the literature showed that there was no consistent relationship between cross-cutting exposure and political participation (Matthes et al., 2019). Given that social media are widely used by young adults and this usage is likely to contribute to exposure to diverse political views and communication with heterogeneous others due to the inadvertent-structural force in the online environment (Lu, 2019; Weeks et al., 2017), it is important to revisit the role of cross-cutting and like-minded discussion in the social media context and how they encourage or discourage young adults to participate in politics.

To probe the inconclusive empirical evidence, scholars have examined various factors, such as the sources of cross-pressures (e.g., individual and structural sources; Nir, 2005), the measurement of disagreement (Eveland &

Hively, 2009), and the form of participation (Lee, 2012), to explain the influence of exposure to a cross-cutting perspective on political participation. More recently, Matthes et al. (2019) suggested that future researchers should systematically investigate potential mediating paths in light of the fact that most previous studies have tested the direct relationship. Our study revisits one of the most prominent explanations in the relationship between cross-cutting exposure and political participation: political ambivalence. Mutz (2002) emphasized the underlying mechanism of influence by examining the role of political ambivalence and suggested that people with cross-cutting networks are likely to hold ambivalent political attitudes, which in turn depress political participation.

Previous research has suggested two types of ambivalence: subjective and objective ambivalence. Subjective ambivalence refers to the actual experience of having mixed or opposing feelings. It has been defined as "feelings of conflict that a person experiences when an attitude object is considered" (Priester & Petty, 1996, p. 432). Ambivalence can also be an objective attitude in which two competing cognitive considerations, thoughts, or feelings are present toward an object. In this research, we focus on objective ambivalence, defined as the "coexistence of positive and negative dispositions toward an attitude object" (Ajzen, 2001, p. 39). These dispositions can be produced when people encounter counter-attitudinal political information or when they are in a more heterogeneous social network and information environment that is likely to increase cross-cutting exposure (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). From an attitudinal perspective, Mutz (2006) suggested that exposure to counter-attitudinal information increases the accessibility of a wider range of attitudes and makes people uncertain of their own positions with respect to issues or candidates, thus increasing ambivalence. These conflicting attitudes could hinder people's ability to make decisions and disengage them from the political process. From the cognitive-processing perspective, exposure to counter-attitudinal information can also trigger people to seek additional information and engage in systematic and effortful processing of information (Basinger & Lavine, 2005; Rudolph & Popp, 2007). Although the process can prompt a more accurate and balanced political judgment (Meffert et al., 2004), the internalization of competing arguments could delay voting decisions during an election (Matthes, 2012) and weaken subsequent behavioral intentions (Levendusky, 2013).

Scholars have applied the relationship between cross-cutting exposure and political participation to the emerging media context, in particular social media. However, the results continue to be inconsistent. For example, Kim and Chen (2016) found that exposure to cross-cutting perspectives on social media encourages online political participation, suggesting that social media facilitate learning about public affairs through exposure to diverse and cross-cutting perspectives and create opportunities for political engagement in the

online realm. Other studies, however, showed that cross-cutting exposure on social media inhibits political participation both online and offline (Lu et al., 2016). Accordingly, the current study revisits the indirect effect of exposure to cross-cutting political discussion on social media on online political participation through political ambivalence.

By contrast, like-minded exposure, such as consuming partisan media or being in a homogenous social network that is associated with increased exposure to attitude-consistent information, has been consistently found to mobilize political participation (Dilliplane, 2011; Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2018; Wojcieszak et al., 2016). Exposure to attitude-consistent information can reinforce partisan cues and reduce political ambivalence (Hutchens et al., 2015). By lessening ambivalent thoughts and feelings and reinforcing existing attitudes, like-minded exposure can make people's political views stronger and more certain, which encourages participatory behaviors (Chen et al., 2020; Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Kim & Hyun, 2017; Wojcieszak et al., 2016). Accordingly, we propose that like-minded political discussion on social media would reduce political ambivalence, and the lessened political ambivalence would in turn mobilize online political participation. Following are the direct and indirect hypotheses:

H1a: Cross-cutting political discussion on social media is positively related to political ambivalence.

H1b: Like-minded political discussion on social media is negatively related to political ambivalence.

H2: Political ambivalence is negatively related to online political participation.

H3a: Cross-cutting political discussion on social media will demobilize online political participation through enhanced political ambivalence.

H3b: Like-minded political discussion on social media will mobilize online political participation through diminished political ambivalence

The Moderating Role of Issue Importance

Cross-cutting exposure may prompt ambivalence, which in turn will foster or dampen participation for *some individuals*, but this may not occur for everyone. One of the primary explanations for the deliberative-participatory paradox is that counter-attitudinal information makes citizens uncertain about their positions on political issues, and this intrapersonal conflict dampens their motivation to participate. However, this explanation may vary depending on individual-level characteristics. We examine issue importance as the individual characteristic that could moderate the proposed indirect effects.

Issue importance is the significance that people ascribe to an issue and the degree to which someone is concerned deeply about the issue (Krosnick, 1990). Investment in and passion about an issue result from the strong associations between attitude importance, core values, self-interest, and reference groups (Boninger et al., 1995). Attitude importance has often been characterized as one of the features defining strong attitude, which is stable and resistant to change (Boninger et al., 1995). Research has shown that greater importance placed on an attitude enhances the consistency of the attitude structure. Studies have also consistently shown positive relationships among attitude importance, attitude certainty, and attitude stability (e.g., Wojcieszak, 2012). Accordingly, people with greater issue importance pay attention to both cross-cutting and like-minded information given that knowing the different sides is useful for understanding the whole issue and reducing uncertainty (Chen, 2018). People who consider an issue personally important are less likely to anticipate dissonance from their cross-cutting exposure and have stronger self-conviction and thus tend not to be swayed by counter-attitudinal messages (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009).

Following this line of reasoning, when cross-cutting discussion depresses online political participation by enhancing political ambivalence toward the issue, issue importance should be able to counteract the negative indirect effect given that it could weaken the effect of cross-cutting discussion on ambivalence. In contrast, when like-minded discussion boosts online political participation by decreasing political ambivalence toward the issue, issue importance can further strengthen this indirect relationship as it could enhance the influence of like-minded discussion on lowering political ambivalence. Thus, the moderated mediation hypotheses are proposed as follows and the process is presented in Figure 1.

H4a: The demobilizing effect of cross-cutting political discussion on online political participation through enhanced political ambivalence will be weaker when the level of issue importance is greater.

H4b: The mobilizing effect of like-minded political discussion on online political participation through diminished political ambivalence will be stronger when the level of issue importance is greater.

Method

Sampling

Data were collected through paper questionnaires distributed through multi-stage probability sampling to university students in Taipei, Taiwan between May and July 2019. First, three private universities and four public universities
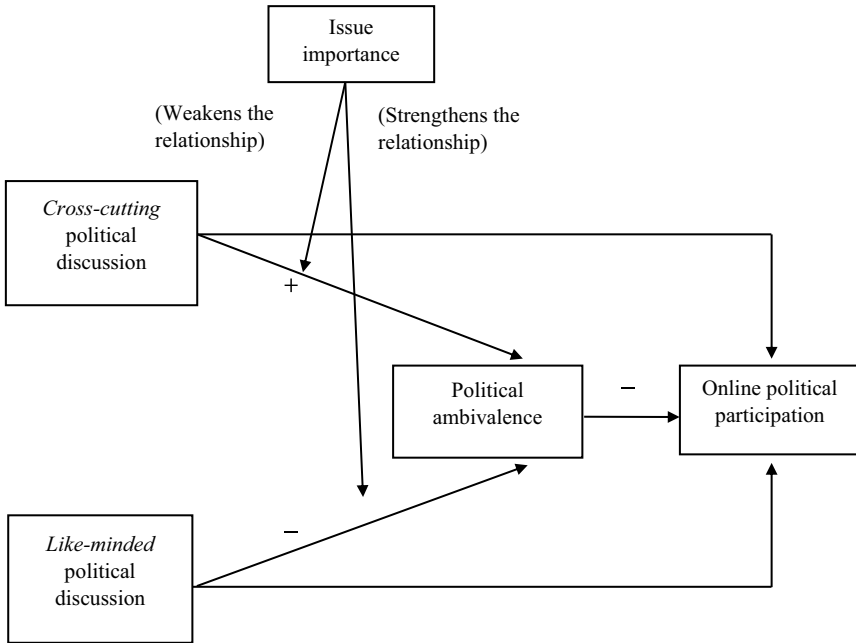
Figure 1. Proposed moderated mediation model: the indirect effect of cross-cutting /like-minded political discussion on social media on online political participation through political ambivalence is contingent on the level of issue importance.

were randomly selected. Second, a list of general courses offered by each of the universities was obtained. One hundred and thirty-six general courses in total were randomly selected from the seven universities. We use general courses as the sampling unit because general courses in Taiwan are offered to students across different majors and years. E-mail requests were made to instructors to allow questionnaires to be distributed in their class. If instructors refused or did not respond, another class was selected. A total of 26 instructors replied affirmatively (response rate = 19%). On the designated class days, research assistants distributed the paper questionnaires and students were invited to participate in the survey. A total of 1,005 students participated (58.2% of registered students), and 989 valid responses were obtained.

Measures

Online Political Participation

Following previous literature (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2015), respondents were asked whether they had used the Internet for the following activities in the previous 6 months: (1) used social media to post pictures related to political affairs, (2) written something about political affairs on social media,

(3) participated in social groups related to political affairs, (4) encouraged people to join social groups related to political affairs, (5) encouraged people to participate in a rally or protest, (6) signed a petition, and (7) contacted a politician or government officer (1 = Yes, 0 = No). The binary responses were combined to form a cumulative index ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 1.85$).

Political Ambivalence

We adopted Lee and Chan's (2009) approach to measure objective ambivalence and focused on individuals' thoughts about the issue. We examined two issues in this study: (1) Taiwan's international status and (2) labor rights. To relate the issues to the political context, we specifically asked respondents to answer questions about two events: (1) changing the "Chinese Taipei" Olympic team name and (2) the China Airlines pilot strike. Participants indicated their opinion about the reasonableness about six arguments – three supportive and three oppositional – on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree* (international status: $\alpha_{supportive} = .80$, $\alpha_{oppositional} = .79$; labor rights: $\alpha_{supportive} = .79$, $\alpha_{oppositional} = .72$). Factor analyses showed that agreement with the three supporting arguments and agreement with the three oppositional arguments constructed two clean factors (international status: eigenvalues = 2.16 and 2.13 respectively; labor rights: eigenvalues = 2.20 and 1.94 respectively).

The score for objective ambivalence was then calculated using an adaptation of the Griffin formula (Basinger & Lavine, 2005; Thompson et al., 1995):

$$\text{Objective ambivalence} = \frac{(P + N)}{2} - |P - N|$$

The formula considers both the intensity and the polarity of a person's thoughts or feelings about an issue (see Appendix A for calculation examples). Intensity refers to the strength of the thoughts or feelings without considering the positive (P) or negative attribute (N), while polarity refers to the difference between the strength of positive thoughts and feelings and the strength of negative thoughts and feelings (international status: $M = 2.03$, $SD = .92$; labor rights: $M = 1.87$, $SD = .89$).

Political Discussion on Social Media

We measured two different types of political discussion on social media: like-minded and cross-cutting. For the like-minded political discussion, respondents were asked how often they discuss politics on social media with people who (1) "agree with my opinion", (2) "are similar to my political views", and (3) "support a politician or a political party I also support", with answers ranging from 1 = *never* to 4 = *always*. The three items were averaged to form an index of like-minded political discussion ($\alpha = .95$, $M = 2.36$, $SD = .98$). For cross-cutting political discussion,

respondents were asked how often they discuss politics with people who (1) "disagree with my opinion", (2) "are dissimilar to my political views", and (3) "support a politician and a political party I oppose" on a scale from 1 = *never* to 4 = *always*. The three items were averaged to form an index of cross-cutting political discussion on social media (α = .96, M = 1.95, SD = .81). Factor analyses showed two clean factors, suggesting two different types of political discussions on social media (eigenvalues = 2.80 for cross-cutting and 2.74 for like-minded discussion).

Issue Importance

Participants were asked to indicate how important (1) Taiwan's international status and (2) labor rights were to them personally (Kim, 2009). Response options ranged from 1 = *not at all important* to 5 *extremely important* (international status: M = 3.89, SD = .88; labor rights: M = 4.04, SD = .81).

Control Variables

Demographic variables, including gender (61.5% female), age (M = 20.85, SD = 1.72), and social class of the family (from 1 = *lower class* to 5 = *upper class; M* = 3.10, SD = .70), were included as control variables. We also included political interest and internal political efficacy as control variables. For political interest, respondents stated their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*) with the statement: "I am interested in politics" (M = 2.39, SD = .86). For internal political efficacy (Niemi et al., 1991), respondents stated their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*) on whether they (1) could understand and participate in politics and public affairs, and (2) had a better understanding of politics and government compared to others (Spearman-Brown Coefficient = .80, M = 2.32, SD = .68). Respondents' cross-cutting (α = .93, M = 1.96, SD = .87) and like-minded (α = .92, M = 2.07, SD = .92) information-seeking behaviors were included given that the literature has shown a strong relationship between information seeking and political discussion (e.g., Cho et al., 2009; See Appendix B for the measures). In addition, we included as controls measures of how frequently participants read newspapers (M = 2.01, SD = .65), watched television news (M = 2.83, SD = .81), and used social media for news (M = 3.61, SD = .68; see Appendix C for more information about social media use among university students). Answers were ranked from 1 = *never* to 4 = *always*.

Statistical Analysis

The PROCESS macro with 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) was used to examine the hypotheses given that the PROCESS macro uses Ordinary Least Squares regression

to estimate conditional, indirect, and conditional indirect effects simultaneously. First, we adopted the Model 4 template to examine the direct (H1a, H1b, and H2) and indirect effects (H3a and H3b). Then, we employed the Model 7 template to examine the conditional indirect effect (H4a and H4b). Statistical significance ($p < .05$) is achieved when the lower bound (LL) and upper bound (UL) CI do not include zero. The two issues are analyzed and reported separately in two different tables to understand whether the relationships sustain across two different issues.

Results

The Direct and Indirect Effects

Table 1 presents the regressions from PROCESS that test individual paths in the proposed model (Figure 1) for the issue of international status. Table 1 Model 1 shows that cross-cutting political discussion was positively related to political ambivalence ($B = .155$, $SE = .060$, $p < .05$), supporting H1a, while like-minded political discussion was negatively related to political ambivalence ($B = −.163$, $SE = .053$, $p < .01$), supporting H1b. Table 1 Model 2 demonstrates that political ambivalence was negatively related to online political participation ($B = −.226$, $SE = .070$, $p < .01$), supporting H2.

For the mediating relationships, 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples show that the indirect effect of cross-cutting discussion on demobilizing political participation through enhanced political ambivalence was significant ($B = −.035$, $SE = .020$, 95% CI = [−.081, −.004]), supporting H3a. The results also show that like-minded political discussion indirectly enhanced political participation through diminished political ambivalence ($B = .037$, $SE = .018$, 95% CI = [.008, .080]), supporting H3b.

Table 2 presents the regressions from PROCESS for the issue of labor rights. Results from Table 2 Model 1 show that cross-cutting discussion significantly enhanced political ambivalence ($B = .305$, $SE = .056$, $p < .001$), supporting H1a, while like-minded discussion was negatively associated with political ambivalence ($B = −.229$, $SE = .050$, $p < .001$), supporting H1b. Ambivalence was negatively related to online political participation ($B = −.343$, $SE = .071$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. Results from the mediation analysis show that cross-cutting discussion significantly discouraged political participation through heightened political ambivalence ($B = −.105$, $SE = .032$, 95% CI = [−.173, −.050]), supporting H3a. On the contrary, like-minded discussion prompted political participation through reduced ambivalence ($B = .079$, $SE = .026$, 95% CI = [.035,

Table 1. Regressions for the mediation model and the moderated mediation model: the issue of international status.

Issue: International status	Ambivalence (Mediator)			Participation (Criterion)
	Model 1	Model 1A	Model 1B	Model 2
Predictors and mediator				
Cross-cutting discussion	.155 (.060)*	.939 (.209*)**	.131 (.060)*	.168 (.107)
Like-minded discussion	−.163 (.053)**	−.170 (.052)**	.611 (.180)**	.292 (.094)**
Ambivalence				−.226 (.070)**
Moderator				
Issue importance		.411 (.107)***	.460 (.105)***	
Interactions				
Cross-cutting discussion X Issue importance		−.196 (.050)***		
Like-minded discussion X Issue importance			−.190 (.042)***	
Control variables				
Gender	.122 (.077)	.136 (.076)	.131 (.076)	.070 (.136)
Age	.004 (.020)	.002 (.020)	.000 (.020)	.044 (.036)
Family class	−.042 (.053)	−.039 (.052)	−.037 (.052)	−.109 (.093)
Political interest	−.034 (.056)	−.019 (.055)	−.022 (.055)	.361 (.099)***
Political efficacy	−.092 (.067)	−.101 (.066)	−.099 (.066)	.130 (.118)
Newspaper reading	.001 (.059)	−.013 (.058)	−.011 (.058)	−.156 (.104)
TV news watching	.066 (.047)	.066 (.047)	.061 (.047)	−.193 (.084)*
Social media use	−.016 (.057)	−.024 (.056)	−.023 (.056)	.110 (.101)
Cross-cutting information seeking	−.012 (.080)	−.016 (.080)	.001 (.079)	.212 (.142)
Like-minded information seeking	.022 (.078)	.033 (.077)	.023 (.077)	.310 (.138)*
Issue importance	.026 (.043)			.057 (.075)
Constant	2.137 (.529)***	.659 (.645)	.508 (.635)	−1.607 (.948)
R^2	.038*	.061***	.068***	.314***

Entries are final unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. $N = 989$. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$. In the mediation model (results presented in Model 1 and Model 2), issue importance is controlled in the analysis, while in the moderated mediation model, issue importance is the moderator (Model 1A and Model 1B).

.135]), supporting H3b. To summarize, the patterns of the direct and indirect effect were similar across the two issues.

The Conditional Indirect Effect: The Moderating Role of Issue Importance

H4a predicted a demobilizing effect of cross-cutting political discussion on political participation through enhancing political ambivalence; however, this effect was expected to be weaker when the level of issue importance was higher. Model 1A in Tables 1 and 2 reports the results of the interaction relationship in the conditional indirect effects for the two issues. Results show that issue importance moderated the effect of cross-cutting discussion on ambivalence for the issues of international status (Table 1 Model 1A: $B = −.196$, $SE = .050$, $p < .001$) and labor rights (Table 2 Model 1A:

Table 2. Regressions for the mediation model and the moderated mediation model: the issue of labor rights.

Issue: Labor rights	Ambivalence (Mediator)			Participation (Criterion)
	Model 1	Model 1A	Model 1B	Model 2
Predictors and mediator				
Cross-cutting discussion	.305 (.056)***	1.258 (.215)***	.299 (.056)***	.206 (.105)
Like-minded discussion	−.229 (.050)***	−.237 (.049)***	.278 (.182)	.260 (.093)**
Ambivalence				−.343 (.071)***
Moderator				
Issue importance		.326 (.107)**	.162 (.108)	
Interactions				
Cross-cutting discussion X Issue importance		−.235 (.051)***		
Like-minded discussion X Issue importance			−.123 (.043)**	
Control variables				
Gender	.065 (.073)	.064 (.072)	.059 (.073)	.062 (.133)
Age	−.037 (.019)*	−.039 (.019)*	−.039 (.019)*	.011 (.034)
Family class	.005 (.050)	.008 (.049)	.008 (.050)	−.057 (.091)
Political interest	−.077 (.053)	−.071 (.052)	−.074 (.052)	.319 (.097)***
Political efficacy	−.046 (.063)	−.058 (.062)	−.054 (.063)	.166 (.115)
Newspaper reading	.048 (.055)	.035 (.055)	.047 (.055)	−.096 (.101)
TV news watching	.164 (.045)***	.164 (.044)***	.166 (.044)***	−.165 (.082)*
Social media use	−.059 (.054)	−.066 (.053)	−.065 (.054)	.066 (.099)
Cross-cutting information seeking	.063 (.075)	.069 (.074)	.065 (.075)	.236 (.138)
Like-minded information seeking	−.067 (.072)	−.054 (.071)	−.067 (.072)	.292 (.133)*
Issue importance	−.125 (.043) **			.049 (.079)
Constant	2.995 (.503)***	1.255 (.624)*	1.881 (.630)**	−.914 (.943)
R^2	.117***	.143***	.128***	.328***

Entries are final unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. $N = 989$. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$. In the mediation model (results presented in Model 1 and Model 2), issue importance is controlled in the analysis, while in the moderated mediation model, issue importance is the moderator (Model 1A and Model 1B).

$B = −.235$, $SE = .051$, $p < .001$). The moderated mediation analysis from Table 3 demonstrates that H4a was supported for both issues (international status: index = .044, $SE = .022$, 95% CI = [.010 .094]; labor rights: index = .082, $SE = .028$, 95% CI = [.034, .143]).

The patterns of the conditional indirect effect were similar across the two issues. As shown in Table 3, for both of the issues, the demobilizing indirect effect was significant when the level of issue importance was low or medium. When the level of issue importance was high, the indirect effect was not significant. More importantly, the results demonstrate that issue importance weakened the demobilizing indirect effect of cross-cutting political discussion on political participation through reducing political ambivalence.

Turning to like-minded discussion, H4b predicted that there would be a mobilizing effect of cross-cutting political discussion on political participation through diminishing political ambivalence, and the mobilizing effect would be stronger when the level of issue importance was higher. The

Table 3. The moderated mediation models: indirect effect of *cross-cutting* political discussion on online political participation through political ambivalence moderated by issue importance.

Mediator: Political ambivalence	Effect	Bootstrap SE	Bootstrap 95%CI	
Moderator: Issue importance (Issue: International status)			LL	UL
Low	−.075	.035	−.154	−.018
Middle	−.036	.020	−.083	−.005
High	.002	.018	−.034	.041
(Issue: Labor rights)				
Low	−.170	.047	−.271	−.088
Middle	−.105	.032	−.174	−.050
High	−.041	.028	−.099	.011
Index of moderated mediation:	Index	Bootstrap SE	Bootstrap 95%CI	
			LL	UL
Issue: International status	.044	.022	.010	.094
Issue: Labor rights	.082	.028	.034	.143

Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Bootstrap resample = 10,000. Conditions for moderator (issue importance) are the mean and plus/minus one standard deviation from the mean. *SE* = standard error; *CI* = confidence interval. Estimates were calculated using the PROCESS macro (Model 7).

interaction in the conditional indirect effect, as shown in Model 1B in Tables 1 and 2, demonstrates that issue importance moderated the effect of like-minded discussion on ambivalence for the issues of international status (Table 1 Model 1B: $B = -.190$, $SE = .042$, $p < .001$) and labor rights (Table 2 Model 1B: $B = -.123$, $SE = .043$, $p < .01$). As shown in Table 4, the results from the

Table 4. The moderated mediation models: indirect effect of *like-minded* political discussion on online political participation through political ambivalence moderated by issue importance.

Mediator: Political ambivalence	Effect	Bootstrap SE	Bootstrap 95%CI	
Moderator: Issue importance (Issue: International status)			LL	UL
Low	−.006	.016	−.040	.026
Middle	.031	.017	.005	.070
High	.068	.029	.019	.134
(Issue: Labor rights)				
Low	.044	.026	−.003	.100
Middle	.078	.026	.034	.135
High	.112	.034	.053	.187
Index of moderated mediation:	Index	Bootstrap SE	Bootstrap 95%CI	
			LL	UL
Issue: International status	.043	.019	.011	.086
Issue: Labor rights	.043	.020	.008	.088

Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Bootstrap resample = 10,000. Conditions for moderator (issue importance) are the mean and plus/minus one standard deviation from the mean. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval. Estimates were calculated using the PROCESS macro (Model 7).

moderated mediation models, with one for the issue of international status (index = .043, *SE* = .019, 95% CI = [.011, .086]), and the other for the issue of labor rights (index = .043, *SE* = .020, 95% CI = [.008, .088]), support H4b. The patterns of the conditional indirect effect were also similar across both issues. More specifically, for both issues, the indirect effect of like-minded discussion on mobilizing participatory behaviors through reducing political ambivalence was significant only when people considered the issue to be personally important at the medium or high level, but not at the low level. In addition, the indirect effect became stronger when the level of issue importance was higher.

Discussion

Social media have become an essential part of civic and political life. Citizens can easily access different social media platforms and be engaged in democratic activities. Despite the pervasiveness of social media and the evidence for its influence on political participation, studies on the relationship between exposure to cross-cutting perspectives on social media and political participation have had mixed results. This study focuses on the context of political discussion on social media and examines whether and how cross-cutting and like-minded types of discussion would lead to political participation, with political ambivalence serving as the mediator in the relationship. More importantly, we contextualize the relationship to two different political issues (i.e., international status and labor rights) and explore how individuals' attitude importance to the two issues could moderate the relationship.

Findings from this study first resonate with the deliberative-participatory paradox that cross-cutting discussion on social media enhances political ambivalence, which in turn discourages political participation. The pattern of the result is similar across the two issues we tested in this study. Encountering disagreement when talking about politics on social media could cause people to feel uncertain of their own positions with respect to issues, and the ambivalent attitude may make them hesitate to engage in political actions. It is particularly interesting that we found a significant indirect effect but not a direct effect of cross-cutting discussion on participation, which echoes findings in Matthes et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis. This finding helps to disentangle the mixed findings in previous research on the relationship between cross-cutting exposure and political participation by suggesting that cross-cutting discussion does not depress political participation if it does not trigger political ambivalence first. Ambivalence, therefore, serves as an important force that discourages people from taking political action.

By contrast, like-minded political discussion on social media can promote political participation directly or indirectly by mitigating political ambivalence. Having a political conversation with those who have similar political viewpoints can reinforce one's existing political attitude because it creates a homogeneous environment that is ideal for encouraging political mobilization. Discussing politics with like-minded people can "encourage one another in their viewpoints, promote recognition of common problems, and spur one another on to collective action" (Mutz, 2002, p. 852). Prior research has suggested political ambivalence as a possible mechanism explaining the underlying process of why exposure to counter-attitudinal perspectives discourages participatory behaviors (Brundidge et al., 2014). The findings from this study add evidence to support this view and extend the relationship to the context of political discussion on social media, given that social media has become an indispensable component in the rapidly changing political communication environment.

The findings of this study also offer a significant insight by proposing issue importance as the moderator in the relationship to explore the possibility of solving the deliberative-participatory paradox. When cross-cutting political discussion, which plays an essential role in deliberative democracy, increases the level of political ambivalence toward an issue, it will discourage political participation; however, issue importance can counteract this effect. We found that the indirect effect of cross-cutting political discussion on demobilizing political participation through enhanced political ambivalence only occurs when people have a lower level of issue importance and becomes insignificant when people have a higher level of issue importance. The results are consistent across the two issues.

This result may reflect that attitude importance is typically related to a more certain attitude as people invest themselves in understanding the issue and care deeply about it. Attitude importance is related to one's core values and beliefs (Boninger et al., 1995). Attaching personal importance to an attitude represents a commitment to think about the object, to use the attitude in making relevant decisions, and to plan one's actions in accordance with that attitude. Thus, people with strong attitude importance do not tend to be ambivalent in their political discussions with heterogeneous others. their ambivalence toward political issues is weakened. The demobilizing effect of cross-cutting discussion only occurs when people attach a lower level of personal importance toward the issue because the counter-attitudinal, opinion-challenging messages could cause one's attitude toward the issue to become ambivalent. The results of the current study, therefore, suggest that cross-cutting discussion should be promoted under the circumstances when people consider the political issue to be personally important. While this result seems optimistic and has the potential to solve the

deliberative-participatory paradox, we need to acknowledge that there is a possibility that strong attitude and high issue involvement might elicit defensive confidence in one's position and resistance to processing counter-attitudinal information, which is not desirable in the deliberation process.

In contrast, when like-minded political discussion decreases the level of political ambivalence, issue importance can lower the level of political ambivalence even more. Thus, when it comes to the indirect effect of like-minded political discussion on social media on political participation, the effect only occurs when people have a higher level rather than a lower level of issue importance, opposite to the findings for cross-cutting discussion.

This study builds on Matthes et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis by answering their call to examine mediating paths and conditional factors. We revisit political ambivalence as the mediator in the demobilizing effect of cross-cutting discussion as subsequent research has not sufficiently examined this explanation after Mutz's (2002) seminal work, in particular in the context of political discussion on social media. Furthermore, we examine the indirect effect using the cases of two political issues which highlight the moderating role of issue importance in the deliberative-participatory paradox. It is also worth noting that we examine the effect of like-minded discussion together with the effect of cross-cutting discussion so that we can have a better understanding of how cross-cutting and like-minded discussions affect participation in different ways.

Nevertheless, the findings cannot be interpreted without limitations. First, the use of cross-sectional samples means that we cannot make definitive claims of the cause-effect relationships. Accordingly, we cannot rule out reverse causality between political discussion on social media, political ambivalence, issue importance, and political participation. Future researchers could adopt multi-wave panels for the survey design to overcome this limitation.

Second, although using multistage probability sampling to sample university students allows for better generalizability of the findings to university students in Taiwan, we need to acknowledge that not all registered students in the selected general courses participated. Students participated in the survey voluntarily and the response rate is 58.2%, which limits the generalizability of the results. To ease this concern, we conducted additional analyses using data that were weighted to reflect the student population using gender information from the Department of Statistics at the Ministry of Education. The significant results supporting our hypotheses stay the same (see Appendix D).

Third, while we used issue-specific measurements for issue importance and political ambivalence, we only measured political discussion and participation in general terms. Thus, it is possible that respondents' conversational and participatory behaviors are not specifically on the topics of labor

rights or international status. However, both issues have received great attention from news media and raised controversial debates among the public. Individuals' discussion and engagement should to some extent relate to the area of the issue. Future researchers could reexamine the hypothesized relationships with issue-specific political discussion and participation.

Fourth, the self-reported measure of political discussion has received criticism (Eveland et al., 2011), given that the measure can be biased and does not reflect a real-world situation. Researchers could consider other methods such as experiment to measure exposure to cross-cutting and like-minded discussion and its effects. In addition, the measure of cross-cutting discussion did not express the degree of dissimilarity. It is possible that some people who engage in a political discussion encounter a relatively mild counter-attitudinal perspective, while others may be involved in a more severe disagreement in the discussion. Future researchers may consider capturing the degree of dissimilarity in the discussion to understand the differential effects on demobilizing political participation.

Last, in addition to political ambivalence, there are other explanations for how cross-cutting exposure mobilizes or demobilizes political participation, such as information seeking, learning, polarization, and social accountability (Matthes et al., 2019). Future researchers may consider testing different mediators simultaneously to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how cross-cutting exposure affects political participation through various mechanisms.

Despite the limitations, the relationships found in this study provide an explanation for why some past studies have shown a demobilizing effect of exposure to cross-cutting political views while others did not. This study also highlights the potential role of issue importance in solving the deliberative-participatory paradox.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Funding

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