



## A trigger or a muffler?

*Examining the Dynamics of Crosscutting Exposure and Political Expression in Online Social Media*

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**Abstract:** *This study explores the potential of social media platforms to serve as a sphere for political discourse, and investigates the dynamics of crosscutting exposure in online social networks. In particular, the present study asks whether exposure to political difference in online social networks will function as a trigger that stimulates political discourse, or a muffler that silences individual's expressive tendencies. With analyses of an online survey of social media users, this study investigates this question in the context of the 2012 South Korean presidential election. Analyses reveal the growing centrality of online social networks as a venue for citizens' political conversations, as well as the interesting interplay between encountering political difference and perceived social network similarity in shaping expressive behaviors.*

**Keywords:** Social networking sites, political expression, cross-cutting exposure, elections

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**S**ocial networking sites have emerged as one of the most popular online destinations (Alexa, 2012), and allow users to easily connect and communicate with their networks of friends and acquaintances. As the popularity of social media continues to grow, it is also bringing fundamental changes in how users access news, exchange information, and express themselves. While the primary motivation for social media use may not necessarily be to seek political information, an increasing number of users cite social media as their source of news and current affairs updates (Gil de Zuniga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Previous studies have explored how social media use influences citizens' engagement in the democratic process, and have shown a significant contribution to participation in civic and political activities, and building social capital (Gil de Zuniga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). More recently, scholars have focused on the potential of social media to promote pluralistic democracy by exposing users to politically diverse viewpoints (Kim, 2011). While some beginning research findings show that utilizing social media with political purposes and interacting on political blogs increase the likelihood of exposure to diverse viewpoints (Kim, 2011), the consequences of such encounters with politically crosscutting viewpoints remains still unclear.

In this context, the current study seeks to establish a better understanding of political conversations in social media, with a specific interest in explicating the impact of exposure to politically diverse viewpoints. This question is explored in the context of the 2012 presidential election in South Korea, a period during which the role of social media as a forum for political expression becomes particularly more pronounced. South Korea ranks among the top wired countries in the world (OECD, 2013), and over half of adults over 18 report being active users of social networking sites (Asia News Monitor, 2010). With the widespread popularity of social media across all generations, the South Korean presidential election context provides an excellent opportunity to also explore the impact of crosscutting exposure among different age groups.

## 1. Social Media as a Sphere for Political Discourse

New communication technologies are changing the everyday communicative patterns of citizens, by opening up a variety of ways to access information and to connect with others in their social circles. One of the major academic debates in the current media environment revolves around whether the rise of the new technologies could facilitate political discourse that reaches the normative goals of plurality and diversity embodied in the concept of deliberative democracy (Brundidge, 2010; Habermas, 1989). Some scholars suggest that the open nature of online communication can increase citizens' engagement in political discussion (Kavanaugh, Kim, Prez-Quiones, Schmitz, & Isenhour, 2008), while others predict that the Internet would only foster communication within "enclaves", exacerbating fragmentation and decreasing political tolerance (Sunstein, 2007).

The debate about whether the Internet can encourage political discourse has entered a new phase with the rapid spread of social media. Online social networking sites have evolved from simple services that support socializing among network ties to a more comprehensive communication platform where users can share information in textual as well as visual formats on virtually any topic. Reports show that along with pictures of children, animals, and light-hearted talk about everyday concerns, news and political discussions flourish in social networking sites (Nielsen Reports, 2011; Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013), and more than 60% of American adults report having discussed politics in social networking sites during the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2012). In fact, social media newsfeeds or timelines are increasingly becoming the window through which the public views the world, particularly for younger generations (Messing & Westwood, 2012).

## 2. Crosscutting Exposure in Social Media

Some scholars have raised the possibility that the new information environment on the web would not only allow easier access to news and political information, but also increase the odds of being exposed to opinion challenging or "crosscutting" viewpoints (Brundidge, 2010; Kim, 2011). Given the weakened boundaries between political and apolitical communicative spaces (Brundidge, 2010), the interactive environment in social media can promote encounters with political difference. In fact, previous research demonstrates that individuals engaged in non-political online groups organized around hobbies or personal interests are exposed to political views that do not necessarily align with their own (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Given the structural features in social media that aggregate information on centralized newsfeeds and the enhanced connectedness among weak ties, it is likely that social media users stumble upon novel viewpoints that they might not otherwise hear from more tightly knit social circles (Granovetter, 1973). The inflow of information mediated through close as well as distant social ties can increase the likelihood of crosscutting encounters (Boase, Horrigan, Wellmann, & Rainie, 2006).

On the other hand, some scholars claim that social networks generally tend to exhibit *homophily* (Aral, & Walker, 2012; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995) – the tendency for individuals to cultivate social ties that are similar to themselves, resulting in a social structure characterized by groups that are largely homogenous along socio-graphic traits and attitudinal orientations (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). This principle would suggest that the news and information brought to attention within social media would not necessarily accommodate crosscutting viewpoints. In a study of Twitter, users are less likely to be exposed to cross-ideological content from the clusters of users they followed, as these tend to be politically homogeneous (Himelboim, McCreery, Smith, 2013). While this finding seems to resonate with the findings of previous literature on ideological similarity of citizens' social networks (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004), social media continue to transform the shape of communities from small tightly knit associations to far-reaching networks of close and distant ties.

Recent studies provide some evidence to suggest that social media can expose users to crosscutting viewpoints. Users who join political groups or receive campaign updates through social media are found more likely to learn about attitude-challenging political viewpoints (Kim,

2011). The current study seeks to further advance our understanding of this dynamic, by focusing on crosscutting encounters through everyday use of social media, rather than politically motivated uses. In addition, while previous studies examine the likelihood of crosscutting exposure on the web in general, such as emails and group chats (Brundidge, 2010; Kim, 2011; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), this study specifically addresses crosscutting exposure within social networking sites. More specifically, this study hypothesizes that social media use will positively predict users' exposure to political views that challenge their own.

**H1:** Social networking site use will positively predict exposure to opinion challenging political viewpoints.

### 3. The Behavioral Consequences of Crosscutting Exposure

While plurality and diversity in political discourse are normative ideals in political deliberation (Habermas, 1989), studies present mixed implications regarding the impact of encountering opinion-challenging viewpoints in conversations. Previous research illustrates that while political discussion involving disagreement can foster political tolerance and increase knowledge of rationales for political perspectives, it can also lead citizens to withdraw from subsequent political engagement, due to their tendency to avoid social conflict and the increased ambivalence in their attitudes (Mutz, 2002). According to this line of research, individuals in diverse discussion networks prefer to avoid conflict with other members of their personal networks, leading them to refrain from further participation (Mutz, 2002).

A relevant, but independent stream of research examines how citizens' perceptions of the opinion climate shape their willingness to engage in political discussions. According to the spiral of silence research, individuals decide whether or not to expose their own views after monitoring their social environment for current and future climates of public opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Noelle-Neumann (1974) explains that humans possess a "quasi-statistical sense" that allows individuals to survey and monitor the climate of opinion, which they utilize to predict their own positions in the general distribution. Due to fear of being isolated from the majority, individuals will refrain from publicly expressing their opinions when their own position is projected to be in the minority (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). In other words, perceptions about the opinion climate will predict opinion expression because not becoming social isolates is more important than expressing one's own opinion. Studies have demonstrated that perceptions of the current opinion climate predict willingness to express an opinion, and when individuals feel the danger of isolation, they conceal their true opinions and fall silent. (Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001).

Although research has begun to investigate the potential of social media to contribute to crosscutting exposure, the behavioral consequences of being exposed to political difference in remains explored. Based on the findings in the previous literature, the present study predicts that exposure to politically incongruent viewpoints in online social networking sites will decrease the likelihood of expressing one's own political viewpoint.

**H2:** Crosscutting exposure in online social networks will negatively predict expression of political viewpoints.

In addition, this study predicts that the users' perceptions around the general opinion climate in their social networks will significantly shape their willingness to express their own political views. That is, when individuals perceive that the majority of their friends share similar views with themselves on politics, they might not feel discouraged to express their opinions when they come across crosscutting viewpoints in online social networks. On the other hand, when individuals feel that the majority of their friends tend not to have similar political viewpoint as themselves, encountering opinion-challenging viewpoints can further decrease their likelihood of political expression. Therefore, this study predicts that perceived political similarity will negatively moderate the link between crosscutting exposure and political expression.

**H3:** Perceived political similarity in online social networks will negatively moderate the relationship between crosscutting exposure and political expression.

#### 4. The 2012 South Korean Presidential Election Context

Social networking services expanded to reach the general population in South Korea to engage not only the vast majority of younger adults, but also a substantial proportion of older adults (age 18-29: 86%, age 30-49: 61%, age 50-64: 47%) (Asia News Monitor, 2010). South Korea is known as one of the most wired countries, ranking among the top 10 with broadband connection worldwide, and a mobile-phone penetration rate of over 100% (OECD, 2013). In this context, the 2012 South Korean presidential election offers an excellent opportunity to explore the dynamics of crosscutting exposure and political expression in social media.

Representing the conservative Saenuri Party, Park Geun-hye was elected as the first female leader in the country, defeating her left-wing challenger Moon Jae-in (Democratic United Party). While president elect Park's share of the vote (51.6%) turned out to be the highest won by any candidate since the beginning of direct elections in South Korean history, the 2012 election has also been described as "a showdown of generations" (Park, Hancocks, & Kwon, 2013). Park had won broad support from older Korean voters in their 50s and 60s, while Moon's support came more from younger Korean voters (Park, Hancocks, & Kwon, 2013). Previously, South Korean elections had been characterized to document the deep-rooted regional divides in the country, yet media coverage following the 2012 election highlighted the generational differences in the results. Given that the 2012 presidential election particularly highlighted the generational gap in candidate support and the political climate in Korea, this study explores the way in which crosscutting exposure influenced political expression in different age groups. The South Korean culture, as in many other Asian countries, tends to emphasize collectivistic values, and "fitting in" – to attend to others and conform to in-group norms (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Given that younger individuals tend to be more influenced by their own peers and reference groups (Ryan, 2001) and that the 2012 presidential election marked a particular contrast in candidate support between generations, this study seeks to explore how age shapes the relationships of the proposed constructs.

**RQ1:** What is the interplay of age in shaping the relationship between crosscutting exposure and political expression?

#### 5. Method

##### 5.1. Data

This study examined data collected through an online survey in South Korea immediately after the 2012 presidential election. Participants were recruited through an international online survey firm in South Korea, with a pre-recruited panel of approximately 960,000 potential participants. Sampling was done via a nonprobability quota sampling method, which included four age groups, 20–29 (n=47), 30–39 (n=50), 40–49 (n=50), 50–59 (n=58), and an equal ratio of gender; males (n=101), females (n=104). Based on these quotas, e-mail solicitations were sent out to a random sample from the pre-recruited panel that met the criteria. The online survey was closed once each subgroup (age and gender) reached its quota, and thus the response rate was not calculated. Studies have utilized such a quota sampling design across gender and age groups to enhance the representativeness of the sample (Kim, 2012).

Key demographic characteristics of the sample resemble the profiles of the population figures reported by the South Korean government's statistical agency, Statistics Korea, with respect to age (mean ages in both the sample and population are 39) and gender (50.3% female in the sample and 49.0% in the population). The annual median household income of the population (KRW 4,090,000) was within the same range as the sample median (KRW 4,000,000 - 5,000,000). There was a greater proportion of respondents with higher education in the sample (62.4% have a college degree) as compared to the population (40.2% have a college degree). Previous studies that have utilized online samples that match with census data have been shown to provide a more accurate representation of the population (Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zuniga, 2010).

## 6. Measures

### 6.1. Political Expression in Social Media

Expressing political viewpoints in online social networks was measured by asking respondents to report whether they had expressed their support for a candidate in social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Cyworld, etc. Three items that tapped into the users' political expressions (a) "like" or "follow" a candidate (b) upload a posting (text or picture) to express candidate support, (c) comment on others' postings to express their support. The responses of each item were coded as a dummy variable and summed to create an additive index ( $M = .42$ ;  $SD = .65$ ).

### 6.2. Crosscutting Exposure in Social Media

Users' exposure to politically incongruent information in online social networks was measured through a single item asking how often they were exposed to politically opinion-challenging viewpoints of their friends in online social networking sites. The responses were coded in a five-point scale, ranging from "never (1)" to "everyday (5)" ( $M = 2.50$ ;  $SD = 1.11$ ).

### 6.3. Perceived Political Similarity

The respondents' perception of political similarity was measured with two items that asked respondents how similar they felt to their friends in online social networks with regard to two items. First, respondents were asked to indicate how much they agree with the statement "my friends in online social networks and I have similar political viewpoints" on a five point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) "to strongly agree" (5). Second, respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale, ranging from "completely different" (1) to "almost the same" (5), how similar they felt to their friends about the candidate favored in the 2012 presidential election. The responses were summed to create an additive index ( $M = 6.0$ ;  $SD = 1.55$ , Cronbach  $\alpha = .54$ ).

### 6.4. Social Networking Site (SNS) Use

Social networking site use was measured by asking respondents to indicate on a five-point scale ranging from "less than once a day" (1) to "I use it so often that I cannot keep count" (5), how often they accessed their social networking sites ( $M = 2.43$ ;  $SD = 1.30$ ).

### 6.5. Control Variables

A set of demographic variables served as controls in the analysis: gender (49.3% males), age (mean=40,  $SD=10.97$ ), education (median=college degree) and household income (median=KRW 4,000,000 - 5,000,000). In addition, this study controlled for the respondents' interest in politics and traditional news media use. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of political interest on an eight-point scale, ranging from "definitely not interested (1)" to "definitely interested (8)" ( $M=5.0$ ,  $SD=1.47$ ). Respondent's use of the traditional news media was measured with their weekly exposure to news from national television news ( $M=3.77$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ) and daily major newspapers ( $M=2.19$ ,  $SD=1.40$ ).

### 6.6. Analytic Procedure

To examine the hypothesized relationships between social media use and the consequences of crosscutting exposure, multivariate regression analyses were run with political expression as the outcome variable. In addition to testing the direct relationship between crosscutting exposure in online social networks and political expression, this study also explored how users' perceptions about the general political climate in online social networks – conceptualized as the perceived similarity of political viewpoints and candidate support – moderates the relationship. To carry out this analysis, interaction terms were created between crosscutting exposure and perceived political similarity. In order to avoid potential multicollinearity problems between the interaction term and its

components, all of the component variables were standardized prior to the formation of the interaction terms (Cronbach, 1987). Finally, to examine the three-way interaction between crosscutting exposure, political expression, and age, the respondents were categorized into two groups; younger adults (ages 20-39, n=97) and older adults (ages 40-59, n=108), which were represented by a comparable number in the sample.

## 7. Results

The central motivation for this study was to explore the extent to which everyday uses of social media can facilitate encounters with crosscutting political viewpoints, and how such exposure in turn shapes citizens' expression of political opinions. Toward this end, the current study began by examining the direct relationship between citizens' social media use and their exposure to political information that challenged their own viewpoints, within online social networks. Findings in Table 1 provide evidence to support H1, which predicted a positive contribution of social media use to exposure to crosscutting viewpoints. Notably, the significant result of political interest ( $\beta=.23$ ,  $p<.01$ ) in the block of control variables demonstrates that whether individuals are exposed to opinion challenging political viewpoints in online social media is heavily shaped by their level of interest in politics. Yet even after controlling for the respondents' predisposition toward politics as well as a set of other demographic variables, findings highlight that frequent use of the social media significantly contributes to the users' exposure to crosscutting viewpoints ( $\beta=.24$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

Table 1: Predictors of Crosscutting Exposure in Social Media

<i>Control Variables</i>	<i>Crosscutting Exposure in SNS</i>	
	$\beta$	<i>t Value</i>
Age	-.10	-1.13
Gender (high: female)	-.06	-.84
Education	-.02	-.31
Household Income	.00	.02
Political Interest	.23**	3.17
Television News Use	-.03	-.45
Newspaper Use	.14	1.96
Social Media Use	.19**	2.64
Total R2 (%)	16.5%	

Note: Entries are standardized final regression coefficients.

# $p<.10$ ; \* $p<.05$ ; \*\* $p<.01$

The next set of analyses focused on the consequences of crosscutting exposure in social media on users' expression of their own political viewpoints. Drawing from previous work on crosscutting exposure and the spiral of silence, H2 predicted that exposure to attitude-challenging information in social media would decrease the tendency to express one's political opinions. Results in Table 2 show, however, that while crosscutting exposure was a significant predictor of opinion expression, the direction was positive ( $\beta=.24$ ,  $p<.01$ ), disconfirming the prediction in H2. Rather than undermining the willingness to express their own viewpoints, crosscutting exposure was found to contribute positively to users' political expressions.

Table 2: Predictors of Political Expression in Social Media

<i>Control Variables</i>	<i>Political Expression in SNS</i>	
	$\beta$	<i>t Value</i>
Age	.04	.62
Gender (high: female)	-.13*	-2.03
Education	.03	.42
Household Income	-.03	-.38
Political Interest	.11	1.61
Television News Use	-.03	-.38
Newspaper Use	.03	.47
Social Media Use	.16*	2.32
R2 (%)	18.6%	
Crosscutting Exposure	.24**	3.59
Inc. R2%	5.7%	
Perceived Political Similarity	.21**	3.06
Inc. R2%	3.5%	
Total R2 (%)	27.8%	

Note: Entries are standardized final regression coefficients.

# $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

Interested in how the perceived climate of opinion in online social networks shape the behavioral consequences of encountering political disagreement, a two-way interaction term was created with crosscutting exposure and perceptions of political similarity in social media. H3 proposed that the similarity in online social networks would negatively moderate the relationship between crosscutting exposure and political expression. That is, when users believe that most of their friends have similar political viewpoints as themselves (high level of perceived political similarity), they are more likely to be expressive, despite encountering with viewpoint challenging opinions. In contrast, when individuals find that their own political viewpoints differ with most their friends in online social networks (low level of perceived similarity), they are even less likely to express their opinions after they encounter political disagreement in social networks. As shown in Table 3, a significant positive two-way interaction term was found ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ ), meaning that the perceived political similarity of online social networks tends to strengthen the relationship between encountering political difference in social networks and individuals' willingness to express their political viewpoints.

Table 3: Two-way Interaction – Crosscutting Exposure, Perceived Political Similarity

	<i>Political Expression in SNS</i>	
	$\beta$	<i>t Value</i>

Prior Blocks (R2,%)	27.8%	
Crosscutting Exposure x Perceived Political Similarity	.12**	2.20
Inc. R2 (%)	1.4%	
Total R2 (%)	29.3%	

Note: Prior blocks include age, gender, education, household income, political interest, traditional news use, social media use, crosscutting exposure, and perceived political similarity. Entries are standardized regression coefficients after controlling for the prior blocks.

#p<.10; \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

Finally, to examine the differences arising from the individuals' age, the current study analyzed a three-way interaction between crosscutting exposure, perceived network political similarity, and age in predicting political expressions. Results in Table 4 show that a significant negative three-way interaction was found ( $\beta = -.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ). For a better illustration of the results, this three-way interaction is plotted in Figure 1. The X-axis in Figure 1 represents the level of perceived political similarity (high and low), while the Y-axis represents the change in users' political expression per rate of change in crosscutting exposure. The slope thus indicates the change in political expression corresponding to crosscutting exposure, at varying levels of perceived political similarity in social networks. As the two different slopes in Figure 1 indicate, the expressive dynamics differ significantly for younger and older adults using social media. The positive slope for younger adults shows that the inclination toward opinion expression with crosscutting exposure seems to increase when users perceive their friends in online social networks to generally share the same views. On the other hand, the expressive behavior corresponding to crosscutting exposure did not seem to increase significantly for older adults when they perceived online social network friends had similar viewpoints. Instead, the results suggest that older adults tend to be more expressive when they perceive their friends in social networks to have different political viewpoints.

Table 4: Three-way Interaction – Crosscutting Exposure, Perceived Political Similarity, Age

	<i>Political Expression in SNS</i>	
	$\beta$	<i>t Value</i>
Prior Blocks (R2,%)	29.2%	
Crosscutting Exposure x Perceived Political Similarity x Age	-.13*	-1.91
Inc. R2 (%)	1.3%	
Total R2 (%)	30.5%	

Note:

Prior blocks include age, gender, education, household income, political interest, traditional news use, social media use, two-way interaction terms: cross-cutting exposure x perceived political similarity, age x perceived political similarity, age x crosscutting exposure.

Entries are standardized regression coefficients after controlling for the prior blocks.



#p<.10; \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

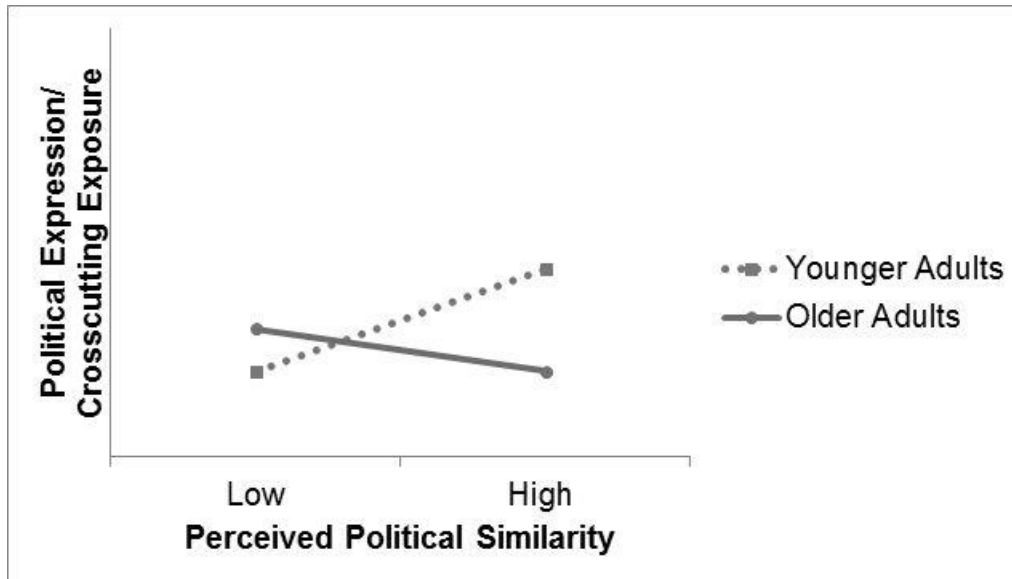


Figure 1: Predictors of Political Expression – Three-way Interaction of Crosscutting Exposure, Perceived Political Similarity, and Age

## 8. Discussion

Although the effects of crosscutting exposure in social media and its impact on political expression merits further examination, this study sought to be a first step in that direction, revealing a number of valuable insights for future research. Previous studies have shown that communicating across lines of political difference is essential to the maintenance of a pluralistic society (Mutz, 2001), as well as to the democratic process (Habermas, 1989). Yet the desire for harmony in face-to-face interpersonal interactions has been shown to decrease the likelihood of citizens' engagement in heterogeneous political discussions (Mutz, 2001). These factors lead to the significance of the current research, which draws attention to the role of social media as an alternative sphere for political expression and exposure to crosscutting viewpoints. Findings of this study suggest that social media may in fact play a significant role in exposing citizens to viewpoints that are not necessarily consistent with their own. Analyses corresponding to H1 show a significant positive relationship between citizens' everyday use of the social media and encountering politically diverse information. This suggests that the use of social media can meaningfully contribute to raising citizens' awareness of diverse political perspectives.

In addition to exploring the potential of social media to expose citizens to dissonant political viewpoints, the present study investigates how exposure to political difference shapes users' expression of their own political viewpoints. To clarify whether the same tendency to disengage from politically heterogeneous discussions in the face-to-face conversational setting appear in the online social media context, this study analyzed the relationship between crosscutting exposure and the political expression in social networking sites. Contrary to the predictions of H2, exposure to politically crosscutting viewpoints did not undermine the users' inclination to express their own viewpoints. Instead, a significant positive relationship between crosscutting exposure and political expression was found, suggesting that rather than stifling political conversations, encountering diverse viewpoints in online social networks can potentially stimulate individuals' engagement in political discourse. This finding is particularly interesting, in that it suggests that the dynamics in social media cultivate a discursive environment distinct from face-to-face interaction, allowing individuals to be freely express their political viewpoints.

Extending the theoretical framework of previous literature, this study also examined how perceptions of the similarity between the users' and their friends' political viewpoints shape expressive behaviors (H3). The results indicate that perceived similarity strengthened the positive link between crosscutting exposure and political expression. This finding corresponds with the postulates of previous research, which suggest that individuals tend to be more expressive when they perceive their own opinions to be the majority (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Given that the current study reveals that crosscutting exposure stimulates rather than stifles political conversations in online social networks, this result seems to further relieve the anxieties that exposure to political difference will lead to political withdrawal.

Finally, interested in how the dynamics of political expression unfold in different age groups, RQ1 examined the three-way interaction between age, crosscutting exposure, and perceived similarity of political viewpoints. A significant negative three-way interaction was found, suggesting that different patterns arise depending on the users' age. As shown in Figure 1, social media users in their 20's and 30's were more likely to express their own viewpoints when they perceived that the majority of their friends have similar political views or support the same candidate, even though they had encountered politically incongruent information in social media. On the other hand, the tendency of adults in their 40's and 50's to engage in political expression did not significantly increase as a function of perceptions of political similarity in social networks. As a matter of fact, the expressive tendencies appeared to drop for older adults when they believed that most of their friends shared similar viewpoints or supported the same candidate. This finding suggests that the dynamics of opinion expression differ significantly among younger and older adults, particularly regarding politics. Younger adults might experience more pressure toward conforming to social norms (Ryan, 2001), and thus be more inclined to express their support for a candidate when they are certain that most of their peers share the same viewpoint. On the other hand, older adults seem to be more inclined to engage in political discussions when they perceive that their social network friends do not necessarily support their favorite candidate. These findings provide the groundwork for future research to explore how younger and older voters engage in political conversations, as well as how the factors that contribute to their perceptions around the opinion climate in online social networks.

In closing, there are a few limitations in this study to be discussed. The findings in this study are based on data from a cross-sectional online survey, which allows for a clarification of the structural relationships, yet provides weak support for causal inferences. Longitudinal research that observes users' political expression over time could provide more robust evidence to understand the impact of crosscutting exposure in online social networks. Despite these limitations, this study provides a promising direction for future research on political discourse in social media, and extending this research will meaningfully contribute to understanding the growing complexities of online social media as a public sphere.

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## About the Author

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