

Cross-Cutting Discussion on Social Media and Online Political Participation: A Cross-National Examination of Information Seeking and Social Accountability Explanations

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Abstract

The question of whether cross-cutting discussion engenders or depresses political participation has offered mixed findings in the literature. Following recommendations from a meta-analysis, this study tests two competing arguments: the *information seeking* explanation for engendering participation and the *social accountability* explanation for attenuating participation. Probability surveys were conducted among young adults in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China, and analyses examined the relationship between cross-cutting discussion on social media and online political participation. For the Taiwan and Hong Kong samples, political information seeking positively mediated the relationship, but desire to avoid social conflict also attenuated the relationship. Neither mechanism was significant for the China sample. The findings suggest that the competing explanations are not mutually exclusive, and they highlight the importance of examining the variety of contingent conditions that influence the relationship between cross-cutting discussion and political participation in different national contexts.

Keywords

cross-cutting exposure, political disagreement, social media, political participation, Asia

Much work on the political implications of social media has sought to understand the democratic outcomes of individuals' discussions with others who have opposing political views. This is because of the intriguing but worrying premise that the positive deliberative consequences from such interactions may come at the expense of participatory engagement in politics (Mutz, 2006). Despite the accumulated body of research, a recent meta-analysis of the literature showed that there was no consistent relationship between cross-cutting exposure and political participation under any communication context or setting (Matthes et al., 2019). The authors of the analysis concluded that the relationship is not direct, but can be contingent on different mediators and moderators, such that "cross-cutting exposure may prompt some underlying mechanisms for some individuals, and this in turn, will foster or dampen participation" (p. 14). This study responds to their call for a more systematic and theoretically informed examination of the processes that may engender, accentuate, or attenuate the relationship. More specifically, we test two mechanisms that the aforementioned meta-analysis proposed

that can influence the cross-cutting discussion and political participation relationship. The first is the mediating role of information seeking as encounters with political disagreement may lead to pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal information seeking (Levitan & Wronski, 2014) that can bolster political participation (Dvir-Gvirman et al., 2018). The second is the moderating role of social accountability based on Mutz's (2002) assertion that discussion disagreement creates anxiety because it causes conflict among relationships and threatens social harmony, which dampen participation.

We use a cross-national probability sample of young adults in three Asian societies that are culturally similar but have very different political systems: a liberal democracy

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(Taiwan), a hybrid regime (Hong Kong), and an authoritarian state (China). Another commonality among these societies is the embeddedness of social media in the everyday lives of citizens. In Hong Kong, Facebook and WhatsApp are used by over 80% of online users while in Taiwan Facebook and Line are used by over 77% of online users (Newman et al., 2019). In China, over 96% of online users use instant messaging such as WeChat and QQ (CNNIC, 2019). These platforms facilitate a social media space where citizens, especially the younger demographic, have many opportunities to search for news related to public affairs as well as discuss and participate in politics online and offline (Chan et al., 2017). Indeed, a meta-analysis of over 100 studies has highlighted the positive relationship between political uses of digital media and democratic engagement among youth (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). We focus specifically on the social media space because it is a setting where individuals are more likely to encounter differences and disagreements in political views and opinions (Barnidge, 2016). The cross-national research design further addresses the need for examining the consequences of cross-cutting political discussion in societies that have varying levels of democracy (Matthes et al., 2019) because different political systems can engender or constrain opportunities for political expression and participation (Skoric et al., 2016), such that the contingent mechanisms that influence the cross-cutting discussion or participation relationship may work differently.

Literature Review

Scholars have long extolled the importance of political discussion in democratic life because it engenders the learning of new information and perspectives, shaping of attitudes toward issues and policies, and participation in activities that influence their lives and others (Shah, 2016). This is particularly so for social media because it is a social space where citizens can conveniently and quickly access news, express and share opinions, come across new ideas and viewpoints, and engage in a variety of political and civic actions (Chan et al., 2017; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019; Xenos et al., 2014). Recent meta-analyses of studies around the globe showed that social media use for political expression was the strongest predictor of democratic engagement compared to other social uses such as for information and relationships (Boulianne, 2019; Skoric et al., 2016), to the extent that the average effect size of political expression through social media on political and civic participation was comparable to that of education (Boulianne, 2019).

The strong evidence for the role of social media political discussion on political participation however does not extend to *cross-cutting* political discussion; that is, encountering disagreement and opposing viewpoints when discussing political and public affairs with others. Political scientists studying voting behavior in the United States have long

noted that the behaviors of individuals embedded in heterogeneous social networks can be subject to diverse and disagreeable political views (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), which give rise to cross-pressures that can “exert severe stress on the individual occupants and that this stress results in attempts to escape in various ways from the area of politics” (Horan, 1971, p. 652). Further developing this argument, Mutz (2002, 2006) highlighted two social psychological processes in which cross-cutting discussion can potentially depress political participation and voting, which is undesirable for democracy. First, exposure to and holding conflicting viewpoints and perspectives lead to *political ambivalence*, which creates attitudinal uncertainty that attenuates subsequent political behavior. Second, disagreement leads to anxiety derived from *social accountability* concerns because taking one position over another may disrupt social harmony among relationships.

Subsequent research however has offered mixed findings in both offline and online participation contexts. Studies supporting attenuation showed that diversity of face-to-face discussion with both Republicans and Democrats leads to lower participation (Eveland & Hively, 2009), as do frequency of talking about politics and public affairs with people who have opposing views (Valenzuela et al., 2012), and exposure to political disagreement on social network sites (Lu et al., 2016). Other studies have opposite findings, showing that discussion with people of diverse backgrounds was positively related to participation (Scheufele et al., 2006), as did having conversations about politics that involve disagreement (H. Lee et al., 2013) and being exposed to politically disagreeable information on Facebook (Min & Wohn, 2018). A more comprehensive meta-analysis of 48 studies also concluded with inconsistent findings despite the inclusion of several moderators, such as communication context, types of participation, and methodology (Matthes et al., 2019). Given the conflicting evidence on the nature of the cross-cutting discussion or political participation relationship (i.e., whether it is positive, negative, or not related at all), we propose a base research question for this study:

RQ1. Is cross-cutting political discussion positively or negatively related to online political participation?

Matthes et al. (2019) concluded their meta-analysis with a call to go beyond examining direct effects and to examine potential moderators and mediators that underlie the relationship. This aligns with Mutz’s (2002) original work that focused on the specific conditions in which cross-cutting exposure can influence political participation. Yet, subsequent research has primarily focused on the direct relationship. We thus examine the contingent role of the following two potential mechanisms: information seeking and social accountability.

The Mediating Role of Online Political Information Seeking

Being exposed to competing political views not only engenders ambivalence, but also greater attitudinal uncertainty, which can be addressed in two ways. First, people can search for information that can bolster their existing attitudes and positions (i.e., pro-attitudinal information). Second, they can attempt to gain a deeper understanding of opposing or unfamiliar viewpoints so they can better prepare themselves for subsequent interactions with disagreeable others (i.e., counter-attitudinal information; Levine & Russo, 1995). Either way, meta-analyses of the literature have shown that informational uses of the Internet and social media, especially for news, are related to political participation across different cultural contexts (Boulianne, 2019; Chae et al., 2019) because news can engender relevant cognitive resources (e.g., efficacy, knowledge, etc.) that drives participation.

More generally, those who interact with people of diverse backgrounds are more likely to consume news (McLeod et al., 2016; Scheufele et al., 2006) and expend greater time and cognitive effort in searching for and paying attention to political information (Levitan & Wronski, 2014). Similarly, rational perspectives such as from information utility theory suggest that when people lack prerequisite information to make certain judgments, they will be motivated to seek out the relevant information (Hmielowski et al., 2017). Emotion-based perspectives such as from affective intelligence theory and spiral of silence theory assume that uncertainty can lead to fear and anxiety, which stimulates people to search for information so as to better understand and deal with their circumstances rather than rely on their habitual cognitions (Marcus et al., 2019) as well as and pay more attention to and seek more information about the general public opinion climate (Hayes et al., 2011).

People with uncertain attitudes would thus seek out both pro- and counter-attitudinal information, which then bolsters political participation. Findings based on partisan selective exposure showed that like-minded information can engender political and electoral participation (Dilliplane, 2011; Dvir-Gvirzman et al., 2018; Wojcieszak et al., 2015) because such information can activate and reinforce partisan cues that motivate people to participate in politics. This does not mean that people avoid information that opposes their opinions because selective exposure does not equate to selective avoidance (Garrett, 2009). For example, experimental studies showed that people with uncertain attitudes would attend to *both* pro- and counter-attitudinal political information (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). This aligns with the notion that when one encounters political difference and disagreement that challenges existing positions, one would concurrently seek out information to reinforce existing positions and learn about opposing perspectives so as to be better informed and prepared for later cross-cutting encounters (Levine & Russo, 1995). Admittedly, some studies did

suggest that counter-attitudinal information seeking might not translate directly to participation. Those based on electoral contexts, for example, showed that counter-attitudinal news may dampen campaign participation (Dilliplane, 2011) and delay the voting decision of those with uncertain attitudes (Matthes, 2012b). Others however have argued though that being exposed to diverse information is conducive to gaining political knowledge, which is in line with democratic ideal of the “informed citizen” who is knowledgeable about political and public affairs, adheres to democratic norms, and actively engage in politics (Delli Carpini, 2000).

Overall, these explanations suggest a positive mediating role of information seeking on the relationship between cross-cutting discussion and political participation because greater information seeking and attention are catalysts for greater democratic engagement in general (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Chae et al., 2019). We therefore pose the following hypothesis:

H1. The relationship between cross-cutting discussion and online political participation is positively mediated by information seeking.

Granted, previous studies have tested the reverse relationship, that is, news consumption predicts cross-cutting discussion (Lu & Lee, 2020). Given that these studies were based on cross-sectional data the direction of the relationships are equivocal and we justify our existing hypothesis based on the theoretical expectations proposed by Matthes et al. (2019).

The Moderating Role of Conflict Avoidance

As politics can be polarizing and controversial, individuals who take positions on one side of an issue or debate may encounter social tensions when discussing politics with family, friends or acquaintances who hold opposing views. According to Mutz (2002), the need to be socially accountable for taking such positions leads to anxiety because “interpersonal disagreement threatens social relationships, and there is no way to please all members of one’s network and thus assure social harmony” (p. 840). Similarly, Spiral of Silence (SoS) theory proposes that people derive the opinion climate from their reference groups (e.g., friendship networks) and if they judge the climate to be unfavorable to their own opinions, they will remain silent rather express their views (Chan, 2018; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). A meta-analysis further showed that the effect of an incongruent opinion climate is particularly strong for suppressing opinion expression among close ties (e.g., family and friends) because of the potential social repercussions (Matthes et al., 2018). One strategy to avoid such tensions and avoid social ostracization would be to withdraw from political activities. A pertinent individual-level variable is *conflict avoidance*, which is defined as “peoples’ reluctance to involve

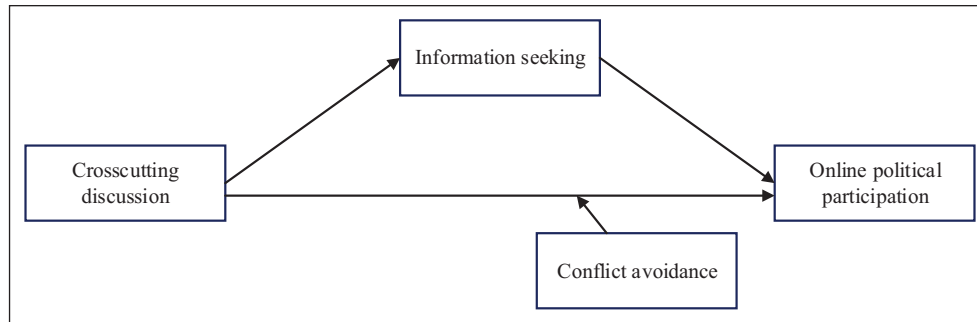


Figure 1. Proposed model of cross-cutting discussion on social media and online political participation.

themselves in controversial political discussions” (Mutz, 2002, p. 848). Based on this logic, those who are conflict-avoidant or judge the opinion climate to be negative when faced with cross-cutting discussion would disengage with politics because of the fear that their actions would have negative social repercussions in the form of social sanction or ostracization. Conversely, for those who are not conflict-avoidant, cross-cutting discussion should not have less an effect because these individuals are less concerned about the potential social costs of their actions. Mutz (2002) demonstrated such a finding with an interaction effect between cross-cutting exposure and conflict avoidance on intention to vote in an election, such that the negative relationship was amplified by higher levels of conflict avoidance.

Despite the supportive evidence of conflict avoidance as a pertinent moderator in the cross-cutting discussion-political participation relationship, it has not received much attention in subsequent political communication research. One exception was a study by Matthes (2012a), which showed that conflict avoidance did not moderate the relationship between cross-cutting exposure and general political participation whereas social trust did. There could be two reasons for the null finding. First, it is feasible that the influence of the moderator is only salient in electoral contexts where the political stakes and threats to social harmony are especially high. Second, the study adopted a measure of cross-cutting *exposure* rather than *discussion*. Since conflict avoidance is operationalized as the tendency to avoid controversial political discussion, the influence of the moderator may only be salient for measures of cross-cutting discussion that operationalized the concept as actual political discussion with people with opposing political views rather than just being in social networks that on aggregate have different political views. To account for this possibility, this study measures cross-cutting discussion rather than cross-cutting exposure, and we propose the following hypothesis in accordance with the social accountability explanation:

H2. Conflict avoidance will attenuate the direct relationship between cross-cutting discussion and online political participation, such that it will weaken a positive direct

relationship *or* amplify an already negative direct relationship between cutting discussion and online political participation.

Combining the above research questions and hypotheses, results in a model comprising two mechanisms as shown in Figure 1. This represents one of the first attempts to examine multiple mechanisms that can explain the relationship between cross-cutting discussion on social media and online political participation as proposed by the meta-analysis by Matthes et al. (2019).

The Study Context

With few exceptions (e.g., Eveland et al., 2015), research on cross-cutting discussion and political participation has been based on single-country studies that focus primarily on the United States. Yet, cross-cutting exposure and political disagreement are not a distinctively American phenomenon, but also prevalent in other societies around the world. This study adopts a cross-national comparative design featuring Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China, which are Asian societies where the Internet and social media are firmly embedded into the everyday lives of citizens. They also share a common Confucian heritage that situate human relationships at the core of society and prioritizes the maintenance of social hierarchy and harmonious relationships (Zhang et al., 2005). Such societies are considered “collectivist” rather than “individualistic” cultures because they emphasize the importance of group goals and needs (Triandis, 2001). For example, when individuals in collectivist societies are in like-minded networks, they are more likely to act together compared to those from individualistic cultures, such that the relationship between like-minded networks and voting is stronger (Eveland et al., 2015). Indeed, qualitative interviews of Korean and American users of social network sites showed that Korean participants had smaller networks of strong tie social networking service (SNS) friends who were also close friends offline (Cho & Park, 2012). This suggests that the attenuating role of conflict avoidance should be more salient for those in collectivist cultures because of their dispositions

toward maintaining harmonious relationships, avoiding social conflict, and having more overlapping offline and online networks.

Sharing similar cultural values may not mean that people in Confucian societies use social media in the same way (Danowski & Park, 2020). One important factor is the political system that can also shape media use habits and opportunities for political participation. In this regard, Taiwan is a well-established liberal democracy with direct elections since the 1990s and a vibrant free press and online public sphere (Lin, 2016). Hong Kong is a hybrid regime that falls under China's sovereignty under the "one country two systems" political framework. There are limited direct elections where citizens can determine who sits in the legislature, but they cannot directly elect the Chief Executive. Moreover, while Hong Kong is nominally free of China's state censorship, its Kong's legacy media has increasingly been coopted by businesses and individuals with strong ties to China. This has resulted in the emergence of an online "counter-China hegemonic public sphere" that is characterized by pro-democracy and anti-government voices (P. S. N. Lee et al., 2017). China, in comparison, is a single-party authoritarian state where citizens have little say on the appointment of public officials at higher levels of government and its media are under strict government control and influence, though some individuals can use creative ways to bypass government censorship (Xu & Feng, 2015).

Different political systems thus shape the opportunities available for political expression and participation as well as their limits. For example, while citizens in China can criticize the government on social media to some degree, any posted content that attempts to ferment and mobilize collective action is censored (King et al., 2013) and the offenders can be sanctioned or arrested. Meanwhile, citizens in Taiwan are relatively free to express whatever is on their mind about politics in the online space whereas in Hong Kong discussions online have been tempered by the recent introduction of the National Security Law that may curtail freedom of speech. These differences may have some bearing on the nature and strength of the relationships among the variables in this study. Supportive evidence is provided by meta-analyses showing that the relationship between digital media and participation is typically stronger for established democracies (Chae et al., 2019; Skoric et al., 2016), such that the average effect size for the relationship between social media use and political participation is highest for studies adopting Taiwan samples (.46) followed by Hong Kong (.28) and then China (.18; Skoric et al., 2016). Chan et al. (2017) examined the relationship between social media political expression and online political participation among university students and also found the same pattern in the relative strength of the relationships. With the above considerations of culture and political system in mind, we pose the following final research question:

RQ2. Do the relationships specified earlier vary according to society?

Method

Sampling

Data for the study were collected through paper surveys distributed to university students in Taipei (Taiwan), Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen (China) between May and July 2019 through multistage probability sampling. Taipei is the capital city of Taiwan while Guangzhou and Shenzhen are two of China's "Tier 1" cities. In Taiwan, four public universities and three private universities from a list of 107 colleges and universities in Taipei were randomly chosen, and general courses taken by students across different majors were randomly chosen. Email requests were made to instructors to distribute the questionnaires and 26 responded affirmatively (response rate=19%). A total of 989 surveys were obtained (response rate=58%). Similarly for Hong Kong, three of eight public universities were randomly selected followed by two departments within each faculty. Email requests were then made to instructors of undergraduate classes to distribute the questionnaires. Thirty instructors responded affirmatively (response rate=32%) and research assistants distributed the surveys in class. In total, 908 surveys were obtained (response rate=59%). For China, six of 10 universities in Guangzhou and two of four in Shenzhen were randomly selected. For three universities, a course from two faculties was randomly selected and for the others one course from one faculty was randomly selected. Email requests were made to the instructors and 11 responded affirmatively (response rate=85%). A total of 628 surveys were obtained (response rate=88%). Descriptive statistics for all variables by country used in this study are summarized in the Appendix.

Measures

Cross-Cutting Political Discussion. Question items for this measure were adapted from Lu and Lee (2020). Respondents answered the frequency (1=*Never*, 2=*Rarely*, 3=*Sometimes*, 4=*Often*) in which they discussed public issues on social media with people who share (1) different opinions and (2) different political views. The two items were combined to form a measure of cross-cutting political discussion on social media. Cronbach's α for the measure was .96 for Taiwan, .95 for Hong Kong, and .85 for China.

Political Information Seeking. Respondents answered the frequency (1=*Never*, 2=*Rarely*, 3=*Sometimes*, 4=*Often*) in which they sought information on the Internet in the past month that (1) agreed with and (2) disagreed with their political views. Cronbach's α for the measure was .85 for Taiwan, .88 for Hong Kong, and .83 for China.

Conflict Avoidance. Respondents answered the level of agreement (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, 4 = *Strongly agree*) in which they tried to avoid political discussion with others because it may (1) irritate people and (2) lead to conflict. Cronbach's α for the measure was .64 for Taiwan, .66 for Hong Kong, and .60 for China.

Online Political Participation. Respondents answered whether they had participated in the following online activities in the previous 6 months: (1) joined chat groups supporting certain organizations or agendas, (2) joined chat groups opposing certain organizations or agendas, (3) encouraged others to join chat groups concerning current events, (4) contacted politicians or government officials through the Internet, and (5) contacted political or social organizations through the Internet. Affirmative answers were summed to form an index of online political participation. Cronbach's α for the index was .80 for Taiwan, .81 for Hong Kong, and .72 for China.

Controls

Political Attitudes. Respondents answered the level of agreement (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, 4 = *Strongly agree*) on whether they were interested in political and public issues (political interest); whether citizens were responsible to pay attention to and engage in public affairs (civic duty); and whether (1) they had enough knowledge to engage in political affairs and (2) knew better about politics and government than others, which were combined and averaged to form a measure of internal political efficacy. Cronbach's α for the measure was .80 for Taiwan, .82 for Hong Kong, and .72 for China.

Political Knowledge. Respondents responded to five questions related to government officials and processes in their respective locales. For example, Hong Kong respondents were asked to (1) name the leader of the Communist Party of China, (2) the Chief Secretary for Administration of Hong Kong, (3) the political party with the largest number of seats in the legislature, (4) the frequency in which the legislative election is held, and (5) the size of the election committee for the 2,022 Chief Executive election. Correct answers were summed to form a measure of factual knowledge. Cronbach's α for the index was .75 for Taiwan, .75 for Hong Kong, and .61 for China.

Social Media News Use. Respondents answered the frequency (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Sometimes*, 4 = *Often*) in which they use social media for news and information.

Demographics. Measured demographics included gender, year of study at university, age, and perceived social class, which comprised five levels (1 = *low*, 2 = *middle lower*, 3 = *middle*, 4 = *middle upper*, 5 = *upper*). It was not possible to use absolute figures for "income" given the disparities among the samples.

Subsequent analyses were conducted with SPSS Version 25 and the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018).

Results

Cross-Cutting Discussion and Online Political Participation

Linear regression analyses were conducted for each country with SPSS to examine whether cross-cutting discussion was positively or negatively related to online political participation (RQ1). Initial diagnostic tests showed no serious threats to the linearity assumptions for the dependent variables and listwise deletion was used for missing values. The base models (see Table 1) were significant for Taiwan, $F(12, 655) = 19.20, p < .001$; Hong Kong, $F(12, 586) = 14.13, p < .001$; and China, $F(12, 376) = 6.92, p < .001$. For all three samples, greater levels of political interest predicted online political participation. Moreover, for cross-cutting discussion the relationship was significant for Taiwan ($B = .22, p < .001$), Hong Kong ($B = .23, p = .01$), and China ($B = .40, p < .001$). In relation to RQ1, the relationship between cross-cutting discussion on social media and online political participation was positive in all samples.

Analyses on the Role of Online Information Seeking and Conflict Avoidance

To conduct the moderated mediation analyses, we used the PROCESS macro for SPSS, which is a regression-based modeling tool that can analyze different types of path models. We used Model 5 template from the macro because it is equivalent to our proposed model in Figure 1. To test whether the relationship between cross-cutting discussion and online political participation was mediated by information seeking (H1) and attenuated by conflict avoidance (H2), we specified information seeking (M) as the mediator between discussion (X) and participation (Y). Conflict avoidance was the moderator (W). All control variables were entered to the models as covariates. The regression results showed that all models were significant including Taiwan, $F(13, 654) = 18.35, p < .001$; Hong Kong, $F(13, 585) = 13.56, p < .001$; and China, $F(13, 375) = 6.37, p < .001$. Specific relationships among the variables are specified below.

The Mediating Role of Information Seeking. Figures 2 to 4 show the significant positive relationship between cross-cutting discussion and information seeking for all samples, though the relationship between information seeking and online political participation was only positively significant for the Hong Kong and Taiwan samples. Results based on 5,000 bootstrap samples at 95% confidence intervals (CI) showed significant indirect effects for the Taiwan ($B = .10, p < .05$, lower level CI = .05, upper level CI = .15) and Hong Kong ($B = .08, p < .05$, lower level CI = .03, upper level CI = .13) samples from cross-cutting discussion to

Table 1. Regression Models Predicting Online Political Participation.

	Taiwan		Hong Kong		China	
	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)
Controls						
Gender (Female)	-.20*	(0.10)	.04	(0.11)	.09	(0.11)
Year of study	-.12*	(0.05)	-.12	(0.07)	.09	(0.10)
Social class	-.03	(0.07)	.03	(0.06)	-.08	(0.06)
Age	.07	(0.04)	.18***	(0.05)	-.01	(0.07)
Political interest	.17*	(0.07)	.26**	(0.09)	.17*	(0.09)
Internal political efficacy	.10	(0.09)	.37***	(0.10)	.31***	(0.11)
Civic duty	.24**	(0.08)	-.20	(0.11)	-.18	(0.11)
Political knowledge	-.09**	(0.03)	.03	(0.03)	-.03	(0.04)
Social media news use	-.04	(0.07)	.05	(0.08)	.06	(0.07)
Study variables						
Online information seeking	.28***	(0.06)	.20**	(0.07)	.05	(0.07)
Cross-cutting discussion on SM	.22***	(0.06)	.22**	(0.07)	.40***	(0.07)
Conflict avoidance	-.27***	(0.07)	-.16	(0.09)	.01	(0.09)
Total R ²	.26		.22		.18	
N	667		598		388	

SE: standard error; SM: social media.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Betas are unstandardized coefficients.

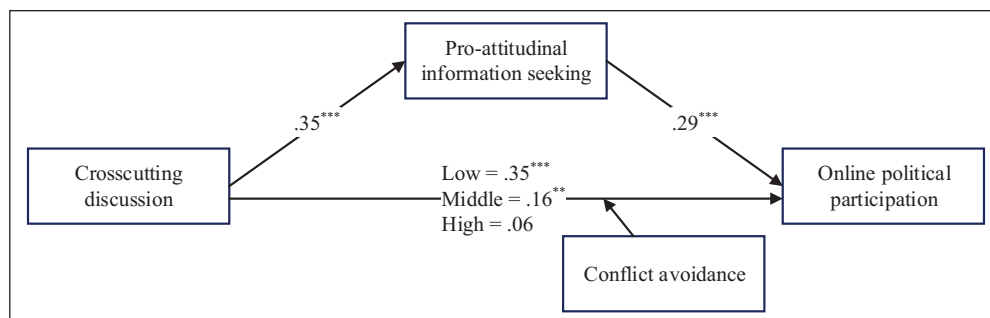


Figure 2. Final model for Taiwan sample.

participation through information seeking. The result was not significant for the China sample ($B = .02, p > .05$, lower level $CI = -.02$, upper level $CI = .05$). Thus, H1 was supported only for the Hong Kong and Taiwan samples.

The Moderating Role of Conflict Avoidance. The PROCESS Model 5 findings also showed significant moderation between cross-cutting discussion on social media and conflict avoidance on online political participation for the Taiwan ($B = -.19, p < .05$) and Hong Kong ($B = -.22, p < .05$) samples (Table 2). An inspection of the conditional effects of cross-cutting discussion on participation at different levels of conflict avoidance at the 16th, 50th, and 84th percentiles of the moderator provided evidence for attenuation. In the case of the Taiwan and Hong Kong samples (see Figures 2 and 3), the relationship between cross-cutting discussion and participation are no longer significant at higher levels of conflict

avoidance. H2 was supported for both the Taiwan and Hong Kong samples, but not for the China sample as the interaction was not significant. In relation to the overall pattern of findings (RQ2), the results were by and large similar in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In the case of China, there was no evidence for either mechanism that significantly explained the relationship between cross-cutting discussion on social media and online political participation. Only the direct relationship was evident.

Discussion

Political scientists have long noted that citizens embedded in heterogenous and diverse social circles can be subject to various cross-pressures, which can induce anxiety and subsequent withdrawal from politics. Mutz (2002, 2006) broadened the problematic as a contradiction between deliberative

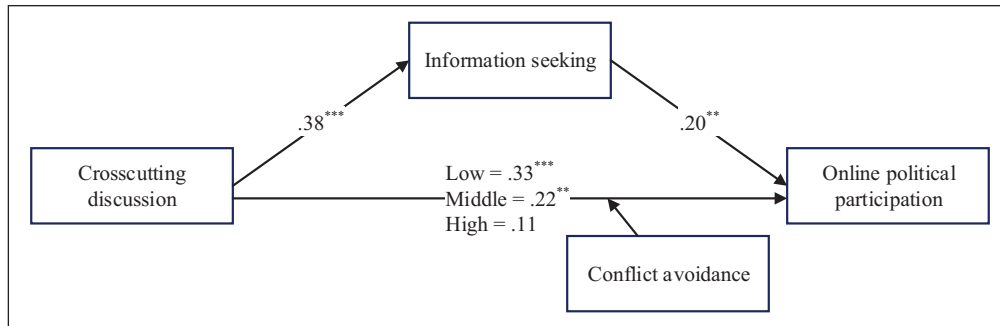


Figure 3. Final model for Hong Kong sample.

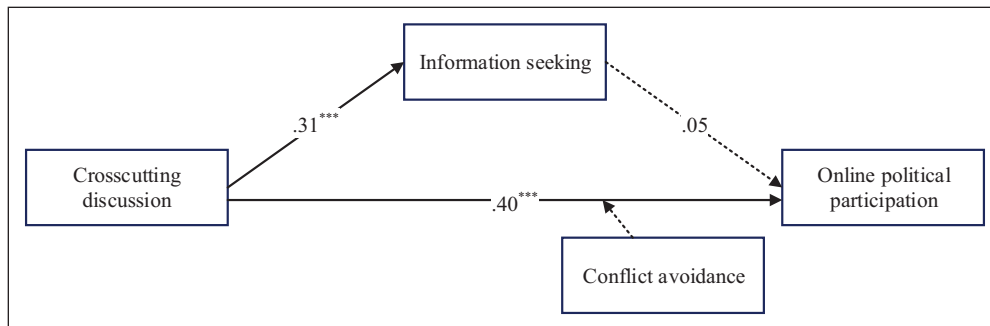


Figure 4. Final model for China sample.

and participatory democracy, such that exposure to cross-cutting views and perspectives may indeed lead to greater diversity of political discussion, but the resulting political ambivalence and the desire to avoid social confrontation ultimately depresses participation in politics. This paradox inspired an abundant amount of research, but the accumulated findings have been equivocal. Thus, Matthes et al. (2019) concluded their meta-analysis with the recommendation to move on from exploring the direct relationship between cross-cutting exposure and political participation, and instead focus on possible mediating mechanisms and moderators because “the picture may be much more complex than previously thought” (p. 13).

This study answered the call by examining the relationship between cross-cutting discussion on social media and online political participation with a cross-national probability sample of young digital natives in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. Previous research on cross-cutting exposure has focused primarily on establish liberal democracies. However, it is also important to examine its implications for hybrid regimes and authoritarian states since any kind of democratization or change in the political system often starts and are sustained through political discussion and deliberation. In this study, we focused on information seeking as the mediator and conflict avoidance as the moderator.

Overall, the findings showed that cross-cutting discussion on social media was positively related to online participation among young people in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. The

direction of the relationships was consistent with analyses of the same countries for political discussion and political participation (Chen et al., 2016). Normatively speaking, this can be considered a positive finding as exposure to and engagement with people with different political views on social media can lead to greater online political participation. These findings however were not consistent with Mutz’s (2002) original proposition for a negative relationship. A possible explanation is that the nature of political discussion online is different to discussion face-to-face. As theorized by Pingree (2007), the act of political expression also affects the sender. One can surmise that political discussions face-to-face are characterized by spontaneous talk and on-the-fly deliberation. However, in the social media space, individuals have time to carefully consider and formulate their thoughts, frame their message with different textual and visual elements, and anticipate possible rebuttals before expressing their political views. Thus, cross-cutting discussion of politics on social media entails greater cognitive engagement and processing that could actually engender rather than dampen political participation.

The inclusion of political information seeking as a mediator added more nuance to the findings. As shown in Figures 2 to 4, cross-cutting discussion was positively related to information seeking in all samples, which supports the idea that when individuals encounter political disagreement on social media, they would attend to both like-minded and opposing content to stay more informed (Levine & Russo,

Table 2. Moderation Analyses Predicting Online Political Participation.

	Taiwan		Hong Kong		China	
	β	(SE)	β	(SE)	β	(SE)
Study variables						
Online information seeking	.29***	(0.06)	.20**	(0.07)	.05	(0.07)
Cross-cutting discussion on SM	.74***	(0.21)	.77**	(0.25)	.46	(0.28)
Conflict avoidance	.11	(0.17)	.26	(0.20)	.05	(0.22)
Interaction						
Cross-cutting discussion on SM \times conflict avoidance	-.19*	(0.08)	-.22*	(0.09)	-.03	(0.11)
Total R ²	.27		.23		.18	
N	668		599		389	

SE: standard error; SM: social media.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Betas are unstandardized coefficients. Control variables are not displayed as the betas are presented in Table 1.

1995). For the Taiwan and Hong Kong samples, this also led to greater online political participation.

Differences in political and media systems may account for the null relationship between political information seeking and political participation in the China sample. By international standards, Taiwan has a robust democracy and it was the only sample where the civic duty to stay informed and participate in politics and public affairs predicted online participation. This is reflective of the inculcation of liberal values and pluralism in Taiwan's civics education curriculum (Hung, 2014). Moreover, a free press and vibrant online public sphere provide ample opportunities for seeking pro- and counter-attitudinal information that can be catalysts for subsequent action. The situation is similar in Hong Kong, which has a very dynamic online space where content and opinions from diverse political perspectives can be shared and expressed even though the mainstream media has largely fallen under Chinese ownership and influence (P. S. N. Lee et al., 2018). In the case of China, the government does allow dissent and criticism for some issues as a way to ascertain public opinion online and hold local officials accountable (Hassid, 2012). Thus, the social media space can feature both pro- and anti-government discourses seeking to influence public opinion (Zhang & Guo, 2019). However, content that attempts to instigate collective action and social mobilization among the population are strictly censored (King et al., 2013). This means that political information might not often translate to actual political participation in the case of China. These findings are thus consistent with the argument that a common Confucian culture does not necessarily entail similar uses and outcomes of media use (Cho & Park, 2012; Danowski & Park, 2020).

Our findings for the moderating role of conflict avoidance were consistent with Mutz's (2002) assertion that the desire to maintain social harmony may temper the relationship between cross-cutting discussion and political participation. In Mutz's study, conflict avoidance *amplified* already existing tendencies for those engaged in cross-cutting discussions

to disengage from politics. Our results showed that conflict avoidance *attenuated* the positive relationship between cross-cutting discussions on social media and political participation for the Taiwan and Hong Kong samples. In fact, the relationship was no longer significant in Taiwan and Hong Kong for those who were most conflict-avoidant. A possible explanation is that Facebook dominates the social media space in Taiwan and Hong Kong, which means that one's political activities on social media (i.e., joining a certain political group) are more readily observable by others. This may cause social tension with those holding opposing political views that can even lead to "unfriending" (Skoric et al., 2018). Comparatively, WeChat is dominant in China and the platform is relatively more private and users' actions are less visible to others, which may render social harmony concerns less salient. This highlights not only the role of political system, but also possible differences based on the use of different social media platforms across samples (Chan et al., 2019).

Before concluding the study, it is important to note its limitations and avenues for further study. First, the study only examined two of several possible mechanisms linking cross-cutting discussion and participation. We tested Mutz's (2002) social accountability explanation, but not the political ambivalence explanation because it is challenging to create equivalent ambivalence measures (i.e., a combination of position and negative attitudes toward an object) that can be directly compared cross-nationally. Yet, ambivalence has been shown to predict counter-attitudinal information seeking (Hmielowski et al., 2017). Future studies can therefore find ways to test ambivalence as another individual-difference variable along the lines of conflict avoidance, such that ambivalence can attenuate the positive or negative effects of cross-cutting discussion. Second, Matthes et al. (2019) proposed additional mediators that are worthy of study, including increased learning and attitudinal polarization that may influence subsequent participation. The addition of these mediators may provide a more comprehensive picture and

understanding of the various mechanisms linking cross-cutting discussion and participation. Third, while this study featured multiple samples, it focused specifically on young and educated adults who are digital natives that use social media as part of their everyday lives, so the findings cannot be generalizable to the general population who may have different media use habits, attitudes, and political participation experiences. For example, social sanctions and ostracization should have more substantive repercussions for adults who have more stable and close relationships in later life. Fourth, while we adopted a stratified random sampling design across the three samples, we cannot discount the possibility of systematic biases that may affect the data, such as differences between classes of instructors that accepted the invitation to participate in the study compared with those who did not. Fifth, the cross-sectional research design means that the findings from the mediation models need to be interpreted with some caution as warranted inferences cannot be made with complete confidence. One cannot discount the possibility that participation can also affect cross-cutting discussions. Nevertheless, the findings can serve as important baselines for subsequent studies that adopt more rigorous research designs, such as experimental manipulation of the independent variable and mediator to establish causality for both direct and indirect effects (see Chan et al., 2020). It is also necessary to raise an important note about operationalization. Future studies should make efforts to distinguish between cross-cutting *exposure* and cross-cutting *discussion*. Coming across politically disagreeable information on social media (e.g., Min & Wohn, 2018) is very different to actually engaging in disagreeable discussion. The latter entails greater cognitive effort and the interactions can have negative repercussions on social harmony and relationships. Thus, while the two may indeed be correlated, their subsequent effects may be quite different. Moreover, future work should also examine the antecedents of cross-cutting exposure and discussion (e.g., Borah et al., 2013). By examining both its antecedents and consequences, we can gain a more holistic picture on the role of cross-cutting discussion in democratic engagement. Finally, similar to previous studies (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014), the measures of online political participation adopted in this study tended to be “passive” in nature. Moreover, there is still the question of what cross-cutting discussions of public issues online actually look like. Future studies can consider a more expansive range of online political activities and different forms of cross-cutting discussions to further strengthen the content and construct validity of the concepts.

Despite these limitations, we add to the literature on the political consequences of cross-cutting discussion on social media and showed how several mechanisms can explain the relationship. The use of cross-national samples further highlights how the mechanisms may work under different political systems and cultures. Rather than dampen political participation, we found that cross-cutting discussion in social

media can engender political engagement, directly and indirectly, among young people in different political systems. Yet, interpersonal relationships also matter and concerns about social conflict and disharmony should always be considered when exploring the relationship between cross-cutting political discussion on social media and democratic engagement.

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Appendix

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables Across the Three Samples.

	Hong Kong		Taiwan		China	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender (Female)	63%		64%		55%	
Year of study	2.20	1.15	2.31	1.23	1.66	0.81
Social class	2.33	0.91	3.10	0.69	2.48	0.87
Age	19.77	1.52	19.89	1.81	19.00	1.06
Political interest	2.60	0.73	2.40	0.86	2.44	0.72
Internal political efficacy	2.37	0.64	2.31	0.68	2.16	0.56
Civic duty	3.10	0.53	3.18	0.64	3.13	0.52
Political knowledge	2.57	1.59	3.37	1.51	2.06	1.31
Social media use	3.61	0.64	3.64	0.66	3.53	0.75
Cross-cutting discussion	1.90	0.82	2.00	0.83	1.92	0.80
Online information seeking	2.16	0.95	2.13	1.01	2.72	0.86
Conflict avoidance	2.55	0.60	2.78	0.68	2.52	0.60
Online political participation	0.78	1.4	0.75	1.30	0.57	1.10
<i>N</i>	601		680		391	

SD: standard deviation.