

Social Media Skills and Social Media Political Expression: The Mediating Role of Pro-Attitudinal and Cross-Cutting Exposure

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Abstract

Individuals' ability to use social media effectively, efficiently, and appropriately is increasingly important as these platforms become a common source for news and political expression. Differences in social media skills have important implications for politics, potentially generating a democratic divide. The present study examines the extent to which an individual's perceptions of information navigation and social skills, two dimensions of social media skills, are related to social media political expression through cross-cutting exposure and pro-attitudinal exposure. Survey results show that social media skills are positively related to social media political expression through pro-attitudinal exposure, and social media skills hold a direct negative relationship with social media political expression. Implications of a social media skills divide and its relationship with social media political expression are discussed.

Keywords: social media skills, internet skills, pro-attitudinal exposure, cross-cutting exposure, social media political expression, survey

Introduction

Differences in access to the Internet have important implications for politics as they can potentially deepen democratic divides. We understand the notion of democratic divide as “the differences between those who do and do not use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize, and participate in public life” (Norris, 2001, p.3). Although mere access to the Internet does not necessarily lead to its political usage, a lack of access implies critical barriers to accessing political information, participation in political discussion, and engagement in online modes of political participation (e.g., Steinberg, 2015).

Beyond access to the Internet, digital divide research includes skills, usage (Hargittai, 2002; van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2011; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014), and its outcomes (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2018). Individuals’ perceived digital skills shape how they use the Internet, including their online social interactions and use of information online (Correa, 2010; Helsper & Eynon, 2013; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014). The concept of digital skills includes knowing not only how to physically operate a digital device, but also how to use different applications, search and evaluate information, and interact with others effectively, efficiently, and appropriately.

Concerning social media contexts, social media divide research has shown that social media adoption and usage are shaped by individuals’ socioeconomic status, efficacy, and experiences (Blank, 2017; Pearce & Rice, 2017). Yet, the primary focus has been on the adoption rate and usage of social media and not on differences in skills. We argue that the scope of social media divide research needs to be expanded. This study examines how differences in social media skills may contribute to inequality in online political engagement. Based on prior digital divide skills research (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013, 2015), this study propounds the concept of social media skills and defines it as individuals’ perceived ability to use social media effectively, efficiently, and appropriately.

The resource-based theory of political engagement – one of the models that explains why individuals participate in politics – suggests that differences in participation are shaped by differences in the resources people have available to engage in politically-related behaviors (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Krueger, 2002, 2006, Carlisle & Patton, 2013). One of these resources is civic skills, which refers to the possession of the capacities needed for speaking, writing, organizing, and taking part in different social institutions. With growing ways of political engagement on social media (e.g., Steinberg, 2015), we argue it is important to apply the theory in social

media contexts as it requires a different skillset from Internet skills to engage in political behaviors.

Social media use demands skills in navigating information online. Moreover, skills related to impression formation (Walther & Parks, 2002), relationship development, and maintenance (van Deursen, Helsper, & Eynon, 2016) of social relationships through social media are also critical to get desired positive outcomes from their use (Helsper, van Deursen, & Eynon, 2015; van Deursen & Helsper, 2018). Prior research has shown that informational uses of social media are positively related to online political expression (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Valenzuela, 2013). Furthermore, such informational uses are predicted by the Internet and social media competence (Beam, Hmielowski, & Hutchens, 2018b; Velasquez & Rojas, 2017).

Drawing from resource theory of political participation, the concept of customizability technology (Dylko, 2016), and information overload (Hargittai, Neuman, & Curry, 2012), we propose a theoretical model of social media political expression, conceptualizing social media skills as another type of civic skills. We focus on information navigation and social skills to examine how these two specific skill dimensions influence political expression on social media through information exposure. We examine two types of political information exposure, specifically pro-attitudinal and cross-cutting exposure, which are conceptualized respectively as the exposure to political information consistent with individuals' prior beliefs (Garret & Stroud, 2014) and individuals' exposure "to political perspectives that they do not find agreeable" (Goldman & Mutz, 2011, p.42).

Literature Review

Social Media Skills

We argue that skills required to use social media effectively, efficiently, and appropriately are a type of resource necessary for social media political expression. A divide between those who perceive themselves as savvier with social media and those who perceive themselves as less skillful may result in disparities in social media information exposure and social media political expression. In this study, we expand the notion of Internet skills divide (e.g., Hargittai & Shaw, 2015) to specific social media contexts by proposing the concept of social media skills.

We propound the concept of social media skills founded on digital divide research. Digital divide is defined as inequalities in access, skills, and usage of digital technology. Such inequalities can have implications for political engagement, as these digital disparities

exacerbate differences in participatory outcomes in politics (Norris, 2001; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2013). Evidence indicates that individuals with higher skills are more likely to visit websites including presidential election information, international/national news, financial, and government information (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). Other studies have shown that Internet skills are positively associated with online political participation (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013) such as online petitioning (Elliott & Earl, 2018) and online news reading and sharing (Beam, Child, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2018a). These prior studies suggest a relationship between digital skills and politically related behaviors online.

Social media skills are distinct from Internet skills concerning the context and functions of use. Social media allow users to connect, get involved, and mobilize their social networks. Whereas the Internet contains traditional media websites such as online news sites or political party websites (Steinberg, 2015). This difference suggests that social media provides users with more social engagement opportunities than traditional Internet websites do, as one of their key characteristics is their dependency on user-generated content (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Similarly, when it comes to social media functions, the consumption of user-generated content leads to the permanent management of self-image and shared content. This social aspect is different from the Internet (Steinberg, 2015); thus, the notion of social media skills is theoretically distinct (e.g., Livingstone, 2014) from other forms of Internet skills.

Our focus is on social and informational navigation skills. Social skills refer to individuals' perceived communication skills that allow individuals to communicate with others effectively and appropriately on social media, as social media requires users to expand, maintain, and/or reduce one's contacts or so-called friends. Because affordances of social media allow users to have friends with diverse relationships incrementally (Hampton, 2016), the persistence of the incremental connectivity may trigger uncertainty in communication norms, particularly when communicating about political issues. In other words, social media users need to keep the diverse contacts on the platforms in mind to behave appropriately (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In this sense, users higher in social skills may be more able to understand the descriptive norms of their social media contexts and adapt their behavior accordingly. This context-specific feature highlights the importance of examining social skills on social media.

Information navigation skills refer to individuals' perceptions of the knowledge needed to search, organize, and navigate the sources of information found online. These skills have been critical since early Internet skills literature (e.g., van Dijk, 2005). Moreover, the

importance of these types of skills have been growing in recent years with the emergence of the overwhelming amount of information on social media, making information navigation skills even more critical (e.g., Hargittai et al., 2012), as highly skillful social media users in information navigation may exhibit efficient searching knowledge and retrieve the information of their interest within a short amount of time. Such skills may allow them to effectively invest their cognitive resources in particular political information and expressive behavior.

Social Media Social Skills, Social Media Information Skills, and Social Media Political Expression (SMPE)

Social media political expression (SMPE) is defined as “communications that express a specific opinion on current events or political processes or that disseminate information relevant to the interpretation of those events or processes” on social media (Velasquez & Rojas, 2017). We argue that social and information navigation skills are related to SMPE in distinct ways.

Concerning social skills on social media, commenting or sharing information carefully on social media is very important as one’s behaviors are displayed to one’s friends. If political posting such as an “I voted” message on social media is considered normatively as appropriate, the posting behavior may be encouraged. This suggests that those who know how to interact with others following the norms of the different platforms (e.g., McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012) and best express their views to get the results expected are more likely to follow such posting behavior (Beam et al., 2018b). Research shows that more exposure to political content has a positive impact on one’s belief of appropriateness regarding political content (Vraga et al., 2015). If political content is normalized in the context of social media, users can take advantage of their social skills and turn social media into a potentially useful resource for their political purposes (e.g., Beam et al., 2018a). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Social media social skills are positively related to SMPE.

Concerning information navigation skills, SMPE requires a set of knowledge specific to different types of social media platforms. Political information sharing with others is motivated by informing motivation (Kim, Jones-Jang, & Kenski, 2020). Such informing opportunity is given to individuals with more resources because it reduces the cost of searching and organizing valuable information regarding political content. Political content can have capital-enhancing opportunities, and it is those with more resources who take more advantage of such information (e.g., Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2018). Information navigation skills can make SMPE easier because those skills lower the costs of getting the information users want and need via liking or searching and may enhance one’s

efficacy in undertaking online expressive political behaviors (Hoffman & Schechter, 2016). Exposure to and a better understanding of such information motivates users to share information on social media about the issues they care about and express their views about those issues, as more information helps them understand those issues better. Yet, political information may be consumed less by those who have higher levels of information navigation resources. Schmitt, Debbelt, and Schneider (2018) found that individuals with more information retrieval strategies such as using a search function experienced more information overload online. Since information overload leads to news avoidance (Song, Jung, & Kim, 2017), it could be that users high in information navigation skills may not be motivated to engage in online behaviors such as liking, sharing, or posting political information because of the information overload. Thus, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: What is the relationship between social media information navigation skills and SMPE?

Social Media Skills, Information Exposure, and SMPE

Pro-attitudinal Exposure

Social media is an important source of news and information (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). Social media provides pro-attitudinal news exposure with its users. Pro-attitudinal exposure is conceptualized as the exposure to political information consistent with individuals' prior beliefs (Garret & Stroud, 2014). Using the concept of customizability technology (Dylko, 2016), we theorize an association between the two social media skills dimensions and pro-attitudinal exposure. When customizable features, defined as "information systems to very efficiently and effectively tailor user's information environment by enabling systematic and automatic exclusion of disliked sources, topics, and opinions, and inclusion of preferred sources, topics, and opinions" (Dylko et al, 2017, p.182) are present, participants consume more news that is consistent with their existing attitudes (Dylko et al., 2017). This suggests that social media customizability helps skillful individuals to be more able to identify customizability features and utilize them (Dylko, 2016). Furthermore, skillful social media users might know specific features that enable exposure to specific information. For example, Twitter hashtag use requires knowing how to find a targeted topic, to search an appropriate page and people, and to participate in a hashtag interaction. Information navigation skills facilitate users' selection of a particular discussion place on social media through their searching knowledge. Moreover, evidence has shown hashtags used for political discussion are positively related to pro-attitudinal political information exposure (Himmelboim, Smith, & Shneiderman, 2013). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H2: Social media information navigation skills will be positively related to pro-attitudinal exposure.

Concerning social skills, we expect that they will be positively related to pro-attitudinal exposure. This is because users with more social media skills might be better at managing their social media network of contacts and might be savvier in forming a politically homogenous network. Socially skillful social media users might understand how through liking or commenting on pro-attitudinal content, they can maintain or expand their exposure to pro-attitudinal content through certain contacts. This creates a loop of more pro-attitudinal content (e.g., Thorson, Cotter, Medeiros, & Pak, 2019) and results in efficient information exposure for them. Thus, we pose the following hypothesis:

H3: Social media social skills will be positively related to pro-attitudinal exposure.

Furthermore, exposure to pro-attitudinal information on social media motivates its users to participate and share political information online (Feezell, 2016; Hasell & Weeks, 2016). Feezell (2016) found that exposure to attitude-consistent information predicted higher online political participation. Moreover, Weeks and associates (2017) found a positive relationship between pro-attitudinal exposure and political information sharing on social media. Given this evidence, we argue that exposure to pro-attitudinal information positively influences the perception of supportive opinions, and perhaps enhances issue understanding. Thus, pro-attitudinal exposure is vital for individuals to enact expressive acts on social media.

Taken together, we argue that as people have more information navigation and social skills which allows them to be exposed to the information they want from friends they select, and as they are more exposed to what they want, they are more likely to share and express their views on social media because they become more certain about their views, gain more information, and think that they understand the issues better (Wojcieszak, Bimber, Feldman, & Stroud, 2016). Thus, drawn from prior evidence (Feezell, 2016; Hasell & Weeks, 2016; Wojcieszak et al., 2016), this study further expects that both social and information navigation skills will have a positive association with SMPE through pro-attitudinal exposure. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H4: Pro-attitudinal exposure positively mediates the relationship between (a) social and (b) information navigation skills and SMPE.

Cross-cutting Exposure

We also examine another type of political information exposure:

Cross-cutting exposure, defined as individuals' exposure "to political perspectives that they do not find agreeable" (Goldman & Mutz, 2011, p.42). Although people tend to seek pro-attitudinal information, politically motivated selective pro-attitudinal exposure is distinct from the avoidance of attitudinally challenging information (Garrett, 2009). Cross-cutting exposure occurs more often on social media than in other contexts such as offline or online platforms, sometimes in the form of incidental exposure (Barnidge, 2017, 2020).

We ask whether higher social skills allow users to expose themselves to more or less differently-minded political information. It is possible that exposure to cross-cutting information on social media evokes cognitive dissonance and makes users want to filter out those dissenting views (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Users with higher social skills would be more able to effectively find ways of blocking out those dissenting views and avoid exposure that generates cognitive dissonance. On the other hand, individuals with higher social skills may be better at interacting with cross-cutting political information. It might be that exposure to cross-cutting political content has been normalized among social media users (e.g., Barnidge, 2017), and such exposure may be taken as normatively encouraged. Also, politically-motivated avoidance was reported in the context of heightened political conflicts such as the Israel-Gaza conflict (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015) and takes place at a lower level (9.81%) in the Hong Kong context (Zhu & Skoric, 2021), meaning that a negative relationship might be present in contexts of divisive and hostile political environments. With the previous competing findings on selective avoidance, we ask whether social skills may help users reduce the frequency of disagreeable political information exposure or increase it.

RQ2: What is the relationship between social media social skills and cross-cutting exposure?

Individuals who have higher information navigation skills perhaps can manage the greater amount of information more efficiently and effectively. There was and still is a concern that increasing amounts of information choice may result in polarization and fragmentation. For example, Fischer, Schulz-Hardt, & Frey (2008) found that participants selectively exposed themselves to more cross-cutting information when the quantity of information they are exposed to was lower. When the exposed information quantity was higher, they selectively exposed themselves to like-minded information. In a more recent article, Choi (2021) argues that cross-cutting exposure has three distinct subdimensions: cross-cutting scanning, cross-cutting integrating, and cross-cutting interaction. Cross-cutting scanning requires the least cognitive involvement, while cross-cutting

interaction requires more cognitive involvement (Choi, 2021). Choi (2021) argues that scanning is a coping strategy for information overload. If so, it can be possible that with more information navigation skills, individuals can navigate the overwhelming tide of information (e.g., Hargittai et al., 2012) because they can search for and retrieve the information they need without having difficulties, and perhaps increase their exposure to cross-cutting exposure with more attention paid to it. These prior studies suggest that those with higher information navigation skills may be exposed to more non-like-minded information. Such individuals can manage a great amount of information by reducing their confusion regarding the design of information and actively searching for information they need. Yet, the negative influence of information navigation skills on cross-cutting exposure is possible. That is, the information navigation skills may lead to information overload, ignoring cross-cutting information. Schmitt et al. (2018) found that individuals' information retrieval strategies such as using a search function positively affected their perception of information overload. We ask, given this competing empirical evidence:

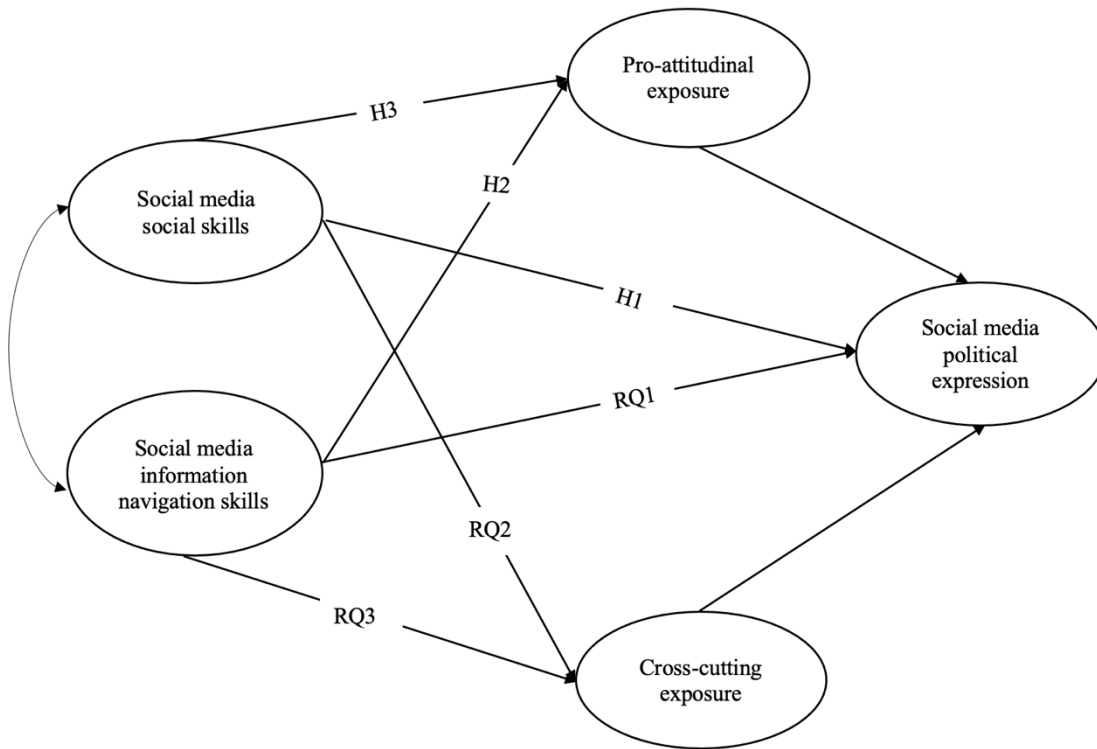
RQ3: What is the relationship between social media information navigation skills and cross-cutting exposure?

Cross-cutting exposure has shown both positive and negative relationships with SMPE. The spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1991) provides some insights into theorizing a relationship between social media skills and SMPE via cross-cutting exposure. On one hand, exposure to dissenting political views is recognized as hostile to individuals' views (Hampton, 2014) and discourages those whose opinions are in the minority to express them publicly. For instance, Kim (2016) argues that a hostile opinion climate on Facebook results in less political expression on Facebook. On the other hand, exposure to dissenting views can galvanize political expression on social media. Evidence shows that online conversation with disagreeing parties has a positive relationship with information sharing on social media (Lane et al., 2017).

Given the evidence that suggests the direct relationship between cross-cutting exposure and SMPE is either positive or negative (Kim, 2016; Lane et al., 2017), and research questions regarding the influence of social and information navigation skills on SMPE, we pose the following research question:

RQ4: Does cross-cutting exposure mediate the relationship between (a) social skills and SMPE or (b) information navigation skills and SMPE

Figure 1. Hypothesized model.



H4: (a) Social skills & (b) Information navigation skills → Pro-attitudinal exposure → SMPE
 RQ4: (a) Social skills & (b) Information navigation skills → Cross-cutting exposure → SMPE

Methods

A cognitive interview (CI) was conducted before data collection to validate the measures of social media social skills, information navigation social media skills, cross-cutting exposure, and pro-attitudinal information exposure on social media. CIs help increase validity when constructing survey items by reducing misalignment between the author’s intention and respondent’s interpretation of survey items. In the CI, we asked participants to describe their thinking concurrently while they were answering the survey questions (see the more detailed process of CI in Peterson, Peterson, & Powell, 2017). A total of five respondents participated. They were national and international undergraduate and graduate students from a large U.S. mid-west university. Participants were asked to answer each of the measures, and then recall their thought process while answering the questions. The authors asked about possible sources of confusion in the survey items, and ways in which they could be solved.

Participants

Participants for the survey were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) between June 4th, 2019, and June 10th, 2019. The respondents voluntarily completed a questionnaire on Qualtrics. Only those participants who reported living in the U.S., aged 18 or over and had a social media account (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) were

included in this study. Each respondent was compensated with \$1 for completing the survey.

A total of 422 individuals responded to the survey. Two respondents were excluded because of incomplete answers. Final sample was 420. Of all respondents, 250 (59.5%) self-identified as male, 169 (40.2%) as female, and 1 (0.2%) as other. Age ranged from 18 to 76 years old ($M = 35.42$, $SD = 11.01$). 298 (71.0%) self-identified as White, 40 (9.5%) as Black or African American, 4 (1.0%) as American Indian or Alaska Native, 38 (9.0%) as Asian, 36 (8.6%) as Hispanic or Latino, 1 (0.2%) as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 3 from other races and ethnicities (0.7%). Education levels ranged from high school or less (12.4%) to a Ph.D. degree (1.9%). The median was a four-year undergraduate degree (38.8%). Income varied from below \$20,000 (11.9%) to \$90,000 or more (12.4%). The income median was \$40,000-\$49,999.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample and the U.S. Population

Demographic Characteristics	Sample	U.S. Population
Gender	40.2% female	50.8% female ^a
Age	35.42 years	38.5% (Median) ^a
Education	Four-year undergraduate degree	Some college or no degree (Median of 25 years and over) ^a
Income	\$40,000-\$49,999	\$65,712 (Median) ^a
Party affiliation	29 % Democrat	27% Democrat ^b

Notes: The data was collected from ^aU.S. Census Bureau (2019). Retrieved December 20th, 2020 from, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>

^bGallup (2019 June 3-16). Party affiliation. Retrieved December 20th, 2020 from, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx>

Measures

Social media social skills ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.61$, $\alpha = .77$) was measured using four items. Respondents were asked to indicate how much they agreed with the statements on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items were (1) "I know which information I should and shouldn't share on social media," (2) "I know a situation when I should and shouldn't share information on social media," (3) "I am careful to make my comments and behavior appropriate to the situation on social media," (4) "I know how to remove friends from my contact lists on social media." The measure was adapted from van Deursen et al. (2016).

Social media information navigation skills ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.05$, $\alpha = .84$) was calculated using four items adapted from van Deursen et al. (2016). Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed

with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The items were (1) "I find it hard to find the information I visited before on social media," (2) "Different social media site layouts (e.g., Web/app version) make working with them difficult," (3) "I find the way social media pages (e.g., NewsFeed page of Facebook/Home of Twitter) are designed confusing," (4) "I find it hard to use the search tool on social media." The responses to all items were reverse coded.

Cross-cutting exposure ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.90$, $\alpha = .88$) was measured with the average score for five items adapted from Weeks et al. (2017) to measure the frequency of exposure to the information on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (frequently). Respondents reported how often they encountered information on social media that was (1) "critical of public issues they support," (2) "disagreed with a politician(s) they support", (3) "was favorable toward public issues they oppose," (4) "was critical of the political party they support," and (5) "was favorable toward a political party they oppose."

Pro-attitudinal exposure ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.85$, $\alpha = .88$) was measured averaging the score of five items adapted from Weeks et al. (2017). Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of exposure to the information on social media that was (1) "positive toward public issues they support," (2) "was critical of public issues they oppose," (3) "supported a politician(s) they endorse," (4) "was critical of the political party you oppose," and (5) "was positive toward a political party they support" on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = frequently).

Social media political expression ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.93$, $\alpha = .88$) was measured using the average of five items adapted from Quenette and Velasquez (2018). Respondents were asked to report how often they thought they engaged in social media expressive actions (e.g., express your views on current issues, share news stories with your contacts, and express your views on political issues) on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = frequently).

We controlled for variables related with the mediating and dependent variables. The variables were controlled for based on theories and prior empirical findings. In addition to demographic variables, the current study controlled for politically-related variables. Given that those who are interested in politics and consume news media tend to engage in SMPE (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Velasquez and Rojas, 2017), we controlled for *political interest*, *news media use*, and *social media news use*. Next, *internal political efficacy* was controlled for given that political expression will be more likely to be enacted when individuals have a feeling that they can make a difference

(Velasquez & Rojas, 2017). Finally, prior research suggests that political ideological strength predicts ideologically consistent sites (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013). Thus, we controlled for the *strength of political ideology*.

Respondents' age, gender, education, and income were controlled for in the analysis. *Strength of political ideology* ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.78$) was determined using a single item that asked respondents what their political ideology was. Respondents reported the strength of their political ideology on a scale ranging from -5 (= liberal) to 5 (= conservative). Then, the absolute values were used so that those participants who identified as strongly liberal or strongly conservative had a higher value while those who tended to be more neutral had a lower value. *Political interest* ($M = 7.08$, $SD = 2.46$) was measured with a single item. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they are interested in government and politics on a 10-point scale (1= not interested at all, 10 = very interested). *News media use* ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.78$, $\alpha = .47$) was measured with three items. These items measured the frequency of print, radio, and TV media use. Respondents answered the items on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = frequently). *Social media news use* ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.03$) was measured with one item, asking the respondents' frequency of news reading on social media on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = frequently). *Internal political efficacy* ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.01$, $\alpha = .88$) was measured averaging the score of five items adopted from Craig et al. (1990). Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with the following statements about internal political efficacy on a 5-point scale (1= strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree): "I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics," "I feel I could do as good a job in public office as most other people," and "I think I am as well-informed about politics and government as most people."

Analytical Strategy

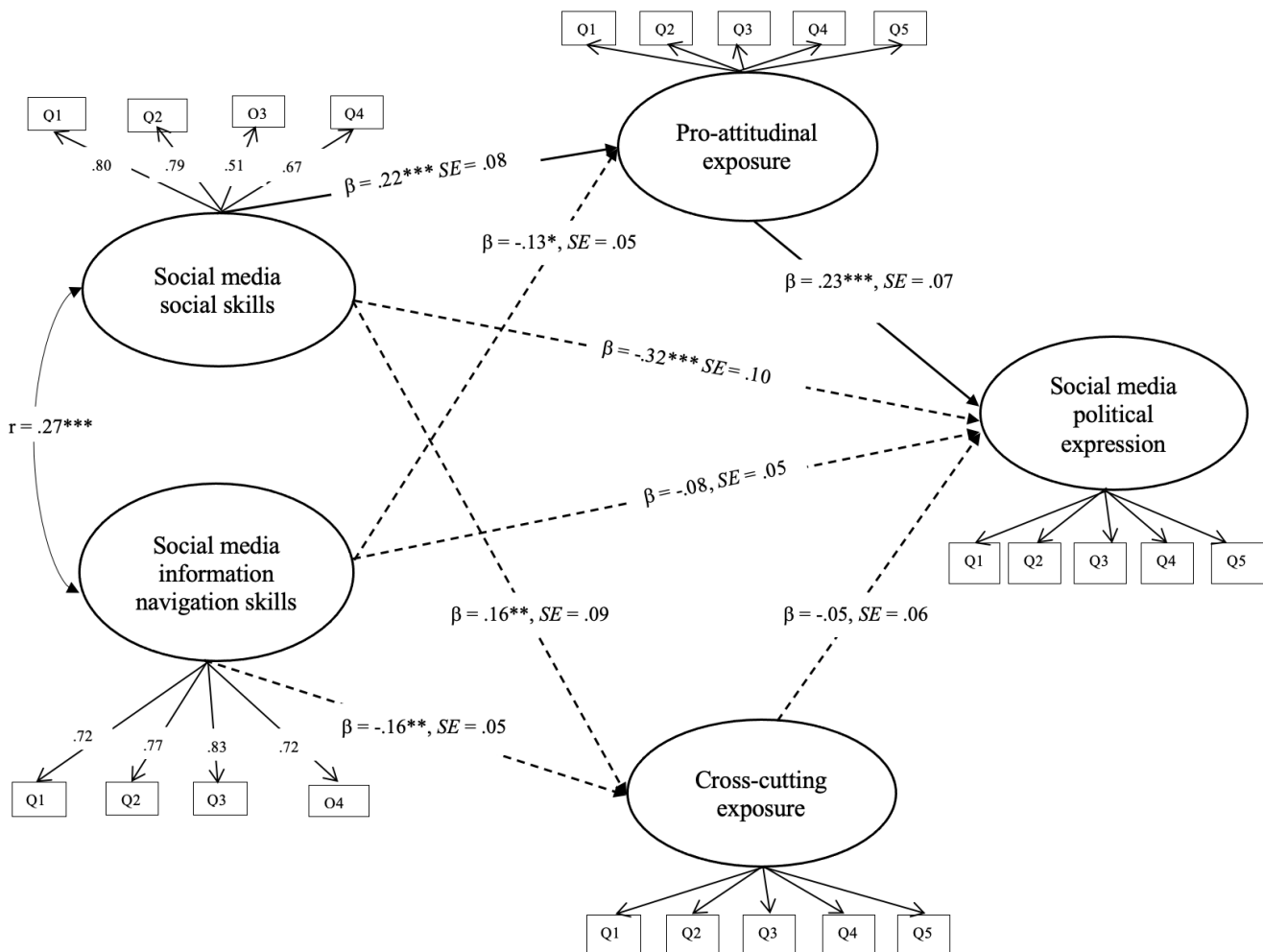
Before further analyses, we examined any collinearity issues. Results for the VIF did not suggest any collinearity issues were present among variables. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to confirm the factor-loading and the assumed underlying process of the measures of social skills, information navigation skills, and three other major variables: pro-attitudinal exposure, cross-cutting exposure, and social media political expression (SMPE). We found that all items were significantly related to their corresponding latent factors. All latent factors showed, the comparative fit index (CFI) of .92, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) of .91, standardized root mean residual (SRMR) of .07, the root means square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .07, $X^2/df = 2.76$, and $p = .001$. The model fit was not perfectly aligned with the criteria suggested by Hu and

Bentler (1999): CFI close to or greater than .95, SRMR is below .10, but it was closer to the criteria and can be considered as a marginal fit (e.g., Schumacker & Lomax, 2010).

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to estimate direct and indirect effect estimates and to test all the hypotheses. We used a R package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) to run SEM. The results suggested that the data had a marginal fit to the model, CFI = .894, TLI = .879, RMSEA = .057, SRMR = .066; $X^2/df = 2.38$, $p = .001$.

We conducted a post hoc power analysis using an online calculator (Preacher, 2006) to determine the achieved power for the tested model. The calculator required a sample size of ($N = 420$), RMSEA, degrees of freedom ($df = 432$), and an alpha level of 5%. The result showed that the achieved power of this study was 1, meaning that the probability of not detecting a significant relationship in the model (type II error) was low.

Figure 2. Relationship between social media skills (i.e., social skills and information navigation skills), pro-attitudinal, cross-cutting exposure and SMPE.



Notes: Estimates include all covariates. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results

Social Media Skills and SMPE

H1 predicted that social media social skills would be positively related to SMPE. Contrary to the expectation, the direct relationship was significantly negative, $\beta = -.32$, $SE = .10$, $p = .001$. RQ1 explored how social media information navigation skills were related with SMPE. We found that the direction was negative, but not a statistically significant result, $\beta = -.08$, $SE = .05$, $p = .14$.

Social Media Skills and Information Exposure

H2 predicted that information navigation skills would be positively related to pro-attitudinal exposure. This hypothesis was not supported, $\beta = -.13$, $SE = .05$, $p = .03$. H3 predicted that social media social skills would be positively related to pro-attitudinal exposure. H3 was supported, $\beta = .22$, $SE = .08$, $p = .001$. Regarding the relationship between social skills and cross-cutting exposure (RQ2), our results show that the relationship was positive and significant, $\beta = .16$, $SE = .09$, $p = .01$. RQ3 asked whether information skills would be positively or negatively related to cross-cutting exposure. We found that the relationship was negative and significant, $\beta = -.16$, $SE = .05$, $p = .01$.

Mediation of Information Exposure

H4 proposed that pro-attitudinal exposure would positively mediate the relationship between social skills (H4a) and information navigation skills (H4b) and SMPE. Results indicated that the indirect relationship between social skills and SMPE through pro-attitudinal exposure was positive and significant, $\beta = .09$, $SE = .04$, $p = .01$, 95% CI = [.03, .18], thus confirming H4a. However, the hypothesized indirect relationship between information skills and SMPE through pro-attitudinal exposure, $\beta = -.03$, $SE = .02$, $p = .07$, 95% CI = [-.07, -.00] was not supported. In sum, results supported the proposition that those who have more social skills on social media are also more likely to expose themselves to political information that supports their existing attitude, subsequently engaging in more expressive behavior on social media.

We tested if cross-cutting exposure positively or negatively mediated the relationship between social skills, information navigation skills, and SMPE (RQ4). The result suggested that cross-cutting exposure did not mediate the relationship between social skills, $\beta = -.01$, $SE = .02$, $p = .41$, 95% CI = [-.05, .02] or information navigation skills, $\beta = -.01$, $SE = .01$, $p = .41$, 95% CI = [-.01, .03] and SMPE.

Table 2. Pearson correlation matrix (N = 420)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1.Social media social skills	1									
2.Social media information skills	.386**	1								
3.Pro-attitudinal exposure	.230**	.034	1							
4.Cross-cutting exposure	.093	-.056	.391**	1						
5.Social media political expression	-.223**	-.186**	.322**	.193**	1					
6.Political interest	.170**	.053	.366**	.299**	.284**	1				
7.News media use	.048	-.109*	.206**	.212**	.360**	.401**	1			
8.Internal political efficacy	.059	-.066	.206**	.159**	.335**	.517**	.381**	1		
9.Strength of political ideology	.171**	.020	.225**	.071	.069	.309**	.048	.152**	1	
10.Social media news use	.102*	.047	.404**	.293**	.532**	.334**	.377**	.206**	.163**	1

*Correlation is significant at .05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at .01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Regression coefficient prediction social media political expression (N = 420)

	Social Media Political Expression	
	β	SE
Social media social skills	-.32***	.10
Social media information navigation skills	-.08	.05
Pro-attitudinal exposure	.23***	.07
Cross-cutting exposure	-.05	.06
Political interest	.00	.01
Internal political efficacy	.08***	.02
Strength of political ideology	-.01	.01
Media use	-.03	.03
Social media news use	1.07***	.04
Age	-.00*	.00
Sex (REF= female)	-.09*	.03
Education (REF= High school or less)	-.01	.01
Household income (REF = Below \$20,000)	-.01	.01

Note: Standardized regression coefficients were reported. All tests were two-tailed, $p < 0.05^*$, $p < 0.01^{**}$, $p < 0.001^{***}$. REF indicates a reference group.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how two social media skills dimensions (i.e., social skills and information navigation skills) were related to social media political expression (SMPE) through two modes of information exposure (i.e., pro-attitudinal and cross-cutting).

Prior social media divide research has shown that certain segments of the population such as female, younger, well-educated, urban residents, and members of higher-income households were more likely to adopt social media (Feng, Zhang & Lin, 2019). Also, usage of social media was also significantly different between individuals in higher and lower social status (Pearce & Rice, 2017). As skills divide is one of the important conceptualizations in digital divide research (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011), we advanced the understanding of the skills divide on social media by proposing the concept of social media skills and examining its relationship with individual’s online political behaviors.

Our results suggest that social media social skills are positively related to pro-attitudinal and cross-cutting political information exposure. It might be the case that those who have higher social skills are maintaining like-minded information contacts through the

use of different social media features such as liking, sharing, or commenting. This result may suggest that cross-cutting content is processed appropriately by individuals who have a higher perception of social skills. Because social media users are exposed to political content from news (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021), even politically opposing views are perceived as appropriate (e.g., Vraga et al., 2015). Conversely, this suggests that when social media contexts are perceived as an inappropriate place for politics by users, political information exposure, especially non-like-minded networks may be removed, resulting in less exposure to cross-cutting political content. This view has implications in selective avoidance research that suggests politically motivated unfriending takes place in the context of intense political conflicts (e.g., Yang, Barnidge, & Rojas, 2017; Zhu & Skoric, 2021), or when the disagreeable political content is perceived as unresolvable (Neubaum, Cargnino, & Maleszka, 2021). Although our findings showed that being exposed to cross-cutting views was not associated with more political expression, it may still promote other types of expressive strategies such as “opinion avoidance strategies” (Wu, Xu, & Atkin, 2020). Given the strategies, our results suggest that political expressive behaviors or strategies may differ depending on pro-attitudinal and cross-cutting exposure.

The findings above highlight an important implication of an individual’s social media skills, for selective avoidance research. As social media is characterized as a mass-personal communication channel, prior literature examined the impact of social contexts such as opinion climate or a relationship with whom one discusses politics (Zhu & Skoric, 2021) but has been silent in examining the impact of users’ know-how on selective avoidance. Our finding indicates that if political content exposure is normalized in the contexts of social media with less intense political conflict, individuals’ know-how to appropriately behave on social media can help them to hear the other side, which is normatively encouraged.

The finding concerning the negative relationship between information navigation skills, pro-attitudinal, and cross-cutting exposure to political information may suggest that one’s active information navigation behavior such as using a search function may not reduce cognitive load because of overwhelming amounts of political information on social media (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2018). Digital skills are believed to help individuals to overcome information overload (e.g., Hargittai et al., 2012) and select like-minded information (Dylko, 2016), but our findings indicate that the higher they perceive their skills on information navigation, the less they are exposed to both types of political information. This avoidance of political information exposure poses a question on the role digital skills play in information exposure on social media. Although passive

news exposure such as news-find-me perception or dependence on algorithmic curation may harm political knowledge or interest (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019), active information search strategies on social media might also harm the quality of democracy. Future research may benefit from exploring the active information use, information overload, and their impact on democratic outcomes.

We found a negative relationship between social media social skills and social media political expression. This result was consistent with prior research that found a negative and direct relationship between relationship maintenance motivations and political information sharing on social media (Lane et al., 2017). These results can be interpreted by considering how users see their contacts. People who are more aware of the negative social consequences of their social media posting and interactions are less likely to express their views on political issues on these platforms (e.g., Vraga et al., 2015). Self-censorship might be the case because social media users are afraid of potential misunderstandings or conflicts within their social networks (Thorson, 2014).

When it comes to the non-significant relationship between information navigation skills and SMPE, it may be that information skills alone cannot allow users to express political views. A previous study found that political interest was required for one to use social media for political expression. Specifically, Naderer et al. (2020) found that skills of information curation on social media negatively influenced political information exposure if the individuals had a low political interest. Because information exposure precedes political expression, possessing more information navigation skills alone may not be enough and other political variables should be necessary for SMPE to be enacted (Prior, 2009).

Lastly, the mediation findings have puzzling implications for the so-called “democratic divide.” Indeed, our findings show how social skills can have deleterious effects on individuals’ social media political expressive behaviors. According to our findings, it counters the basic tenet of skills divides, namely those who have higher skills participate in politics more. In this study, we show that more perception of social media skills (i.e., social skills) would hinder online political participation. However, it is important to note that our results support that those who have more social skills are more likely to be exposed to pro-attitudinal political information. Through this path, they enact more political expression. Therefore, future research may need to examine how those who are digitally savvy participate in online politics in depth.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the sample is not nationally

representative and is cross-sectional. MTurk participants tend to be younger and more liberal (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). Also, they use the Internet for news more than the general population and participants from other online panel data services do (Hargittai & Shaw, 2020; Levay, Freese, & Druckman, 2016), so respondents in this study may have higher social media skills than the general population. Despite the demographic differences, there would be little difference in political characteristics such as political participation relative to the general population sample (Levay et al., 2016).

Second, our self-reported data may overestimate actual pro-attitudinal, cross-cutting exposure, and social media skills (Litt, 2013; Prior, 2009). Evidence suggests that self-reported selective exposure for conservative Twitter users is overrated than the data collected from digital tracing (Shin, 2020). Regarding online exposure to disagreement, Song and Cho (2021) observe overreporting of online cross-cutting exposure. The skills scale, particularly, used respondents' perceptions about their social media skills. Our sample exhibited higher mean values of perceived social media social skills on average, but the standard deviation was dispersed. We found significant results; therefore, it seems that there was enough variance. Relatedly, there is a limitation in the measurement of skills in this study. The self-reported and performance-based methods reported different levels of skills (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006). Future research should assess outcome differences in measurements between behavioral and perceived levels of social media skills.

Despite these limitations, our findings advance our understanding of the impacts of existing digital inequalities on the democratic divide showing that those with a higher perception of social media social skills inhibit their political expression. Those people may end up being left out from the political conversations or intentionally avoid discursive or expressive political engagement. Yet, our analysis suggests that those who have a higher perception of social skills are exposed to like-minded political information more frequently and results in more participation in the political expression on social media.

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