

The Internet and Social Media Integrated Consequences for Political Discussion for Korean College Students

Najin Jun*

Department of Global Media & Culture, Hannam University

Abstract

This exploratory study with a small, non-representational sample attempts to explain the possible interplay between traditional Internet and social media and their combined influence on young voters' everyday, face-to-face political discussion. Assumed and tested herein was that close-tie social media use would moderate the positive influence of exposure to heterogeneous opinions on the Internet on college students' participation in offline political discussion due to the cocooning effect inspired by circular affirmation in close networks. From hierarchical regression analyses of a sample of 123 Korean university students, results supported the negative moderation of close-tie social media use. Lighter close-tie social media users were more likely to participate in offline political discussion as a result of heterogeneous exposure than heavier close-tie social media users. In addition, close-tie social media use facilitated higher political discussion for students with lower heterogeneous exposure. In discussion, however, it was cautioned that the increased political discussion due to higher close-tie social media use may not transfer to higher perspective-taking ability and political tolerance. Implications were provided for future research.

Key words: traditional Internet, social media, political discussion, heterogeneous discussion, homogeneous discussion

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* njun@hnu.kr

With the increase in the use of the Internet and social media, one of the most frequently made attempts in the area of communication studies is to understand the possibility of the online media for serving as communication platforms for deliberative democracy. Public deliberation can take place in formal settings such as town hall meetings, city council meetings, public hearings and community meetings. Yet, where public deliberation begins is at the small group level where individuals talk about political issues in their everyday, face-to-face conversations with family, friends and acquaintances. In fact, understanding everyday political discussion is important for evaluation of potentials of individuals for deliberative democracy because primary reference groups, i.e., family and close friends, are the people who exert the greatest influence on young adults such as college students in voting decisions and potentially in other issues related to politics (Berelson, Lazarsfeld & McPhee, 1954). Everyday, face-to-face conversation with friends and family about political issues can be crucial in shaping college students' opinions about politics and building capacity for positive citizenship.

While literature on traditional Internet is generally in favor of the positive role of the Internet for political deliberation (e.g., Brundidge, 2010; Jun, 2012), studies on social media have yielded somewhat mixed results (e.g., Kim, 2011; Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013).¹ Social media being an advanced Internet technology in itself, social media users are Internet users at the same time. Individuals move back and forth seamlessly between social media and traditional Internet as they use Facebook and

¹ Because social media are part of the Internet, "traditional Internet" will be used hereafter to denote earlier Internet technologies and services exclusive of social media to ensure clarity.

check latest news on a newspaper website on their stationary and mobile devices. This “traversability” (Brundidge, 2010) of the media warrants particular attention to the combined, rather than separate, consequences of traditional Internet and social media.

From a small, non-representational sample of 123 students in a Korean university, this exploratory study attempts to understand possible interplay between traditional Internet and social media and the combined consequences for potentials of the young voters for the democratic process of public deliberation. First, it investigates potential effects of traditional Internet on the students in their everyday conversation about political issues. Building on the existing research indicating positive consequences, it specifically examines if heterogeneous exposure plays a part in the positive effects. Second, it investigates potentials of social media in comparison to traditional Internet. Third, it explores the ways in which the effects of the two respective online media may or may not change when used together, and examines the integrated outcome and implications for the young adults’ participation in political discussion.

Online Media and Everyday Political Discussion

Heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet

Internet use has become part of our everyday communication experience. Indeed, conceptualization of computer-mediated communication as a purely online experience that is isolated from interactions in other settings has long been outdated (Wellman & Hampton, 1999). In this line, studies attempted to understand the ways in which Internet experience get weaved into offline life, examining how traditional Internet use may or may not affect

individuals' network diversity and political participation in offline social settings. They demonstrated that informational use of traditional Internet, such as Internet news and online discussion, was directly and indirectly positively related to higher levels of diversity in discussion and social networks (e.g., Benkler, 2006; Brundidge, 2010; Garrett, 2009; Jun, 2012), and civic involvement (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril, & Rojas, 2009). For example, Brundidge (2010) found that reading news on traditional Internet contributed, though small, to increased political discussion at work and discussing politics with differently-minded people. Similarly, Jun (2012) showed that the negative influence of selective exposure on traditional Internet on individuals' political diversity was compromised by reading Internet news. All in all, this line of research agree that individuals are exposed to both attitude-consistent and counter-attitudinal information on the Internet, though more largely to the former, and that the both information contributes to increased diversity, discussion and involvement in offline settings.

However, we have yet to clarify the extent to which counter-attitudinal information, rather than attitude-consistent information, encountered online may or may not nurture potentials for democracy. Although exposure to heterogeneous information does occur on the Internet, given that attitude-consistent information is consumed dominantly (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009), there is a need to understand clearly if the online experience of heterogeneous exposure is actually responsible for the positive implications, and if the online experience transfers to everyday offline political discussion. In literature, offline political discussion is most often treated as the frequency of conversations about politics, public affairs and social issues with friends, neighbors and co-workers

(e.g., Brundidge, 2010), with others with homogenous or heterogeneous characteristics (e.g., Lee & Kwak, 2016), and at workplace, church, volunteer groups (Brundidge, 2010) and community meetings (e.g., Hampton, Shin, & Lu, 2016).

While there is ample research on the influence of overall online exposure on political discussion and civic participation, there are limited studies specifically addressing the role played by the heterogeneous part of the online exposure in making the influence. To this end, some evidence can be gleaned from the earlier studies on exposure to political difference offline. Encountering political difference helps individuals increase knowledge, awareness and tolerance, broaden horizons, provide intellectual stimulations (Blau, 1977; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999), understand the distribution of public opinions (Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995), differentiate between ideologies and the respectively supported attitudes towards political issues (Gastil, Black, & Moscovitz, 2008), generate reasons for and against attitudes held by themselves and others (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002), and participate in civic actions when combined with news media use (Scheufele, Nisbit, Brossard, & Nisbit, 2004), attention and frequent political discussion (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005). Except for Mutz (2002, 2006), who contended that cross-cutting information would lead to avoidance of political discussion by generating hesitation and ambivalence, most studies provide the consistent finding of the pro-democratic outcome of increased involvement in discussion and actions.

Conversations about political issues are often part of our everyday communication for maintaining and/or building formal and informal relationships. Everyday, face-to-face political discussion is most likely to take place among close friends and family, neighbors, coworkers and other acquaintances. As discussed, encountering counter-attitudinal information on

traditional Internet can help gain knowledge about political and social issues in opposite perspectives and broaden understanding of the issues, resulting in increased confidence. This is aptly explained in the expression, "argument repertoire," which is "reasons people can give in support of their own opinions, as well reasons they can offer to support opposing point of view" (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002, P. 95). The strengthened argument repertoire and confidence can reduce the discomfort or fear of confronting opposing viewpoints that may arise in offline discussion with social ties they interact with in their everyday life. Also, there is evidence that individuals purposefully seek heterogeneous information when the topic is of their interest (Garrett, 2009) or political knowledge is higher (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009), or simply for the purpose of mood management in the state of boredom (Zillman, 1988). Such purposive exposure may reduce resistance to dissonant information and increase attitude accessibility (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009).

The Internet is becoming increasingly interactive. For example, online news is not just viewed and read, but also commented on. Comments posted on a news article can in turn be commented on, or, alternatively, can be "liked" or "disliked" by other readers of the article. Further, online news is not limited to text but includes audio and video, which again are commented on and rated by viewers. Thus, in the more current online environment, exposure to counter-attitudinal political ideas can occur not only in viewing online news articles but also in navigating through comments posted on news text articles, and other media such as audio and video embedded in the traditional Internet. Thus, it would be more meaningful to address the overall exposure to heterogeneous political opinions on traditional Internet than to limit to online news articles with counter-attitudinal perspectives.

Drawing from the discussion above, it can be assumed that heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet is likely to produce positive outcomes with respect to offline political discussion with people one sees every day.

H1: heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet is positively related to political discussion

Social media and everyday political discussion

While previous studies provide relatively consistent findings that confirm positive direct and indirect relations between the Internet and political discussion as reviewed above, how social media use is related to political discussion needs a closer examination. Some of the characteristics of social media that are distinct from the Internet include the lack of anonymity and increased visible social cues (Hampton et al., 2016). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow the exchange of contents such as texts, music, photographs, video and other media. For social media users, this two-way, interactional exchange usually originates with existing relationships. Individuals' relationships are formed around close friends and family, neighbors, coworkers and people from other social settings. In general, social media users interact with people in these social ties over the media (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). For this reason, social media are seen as an opportunity for political discussion that is more closely resembling everyday offline settings than formal meetings and gatherings (Hampton et al., 2016) and discussion forums on more traditional Internet platforms, which are not necessarily relation-based.

Literature provides mixed conclusions about how use of social media is related to offline political discussion. Gil de

Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela (2012) found that social media use for news promotes political participation including attending public hearings, town hall meetings or city council meetings, and speaking to a public official in person. Similar findings were offered by Kim et al., (2013). They reported that using Facebook and Twitter for news was significantly positively related to civic participation, which included attending a meeting to discuss neighborhood problems. Also related was discussion with “people outside their family who do not share their ethnicity, socio-economic status or gender” and “people who disagree with their views.” On the contrary, Hampton et al. (2016) found that frequent use of Facebook and Twitter has a direct, negative relationship to willingness to join face-to-face political conversations at home, workplace and other social gatherings. Furthermore, they demonstrated that exposure to information about political issues through social media is also negatively associated with willingness to join face-to-face conversations on the issues in the same social settings.

The differing results can be understood better when the context in which offline political discussion takes place is examined more closely. Huckfeldt (1979) has noted that “socially based participation is more subject to contextual influence than individually based participation” (p. 587). Put differently, political discussion, which is essentially a social act, is much more subject to contextual influence than individually based participation such as voting. In other words, to decide whether to discuss politics with someone, there are more contexts and cues to consider than to perform an individually based political action. The context in consideration in this case is who one is to discuss politics with. Public hearings, town hall meetings, city council meetings, neighborhood meetings are formal and planned discussions with strangers mostly. Individuals attending these

meetings are not likely to be fully aware of other participants' viewpoints. On the other hand, in everyday offline settings, individuals meet and converse with close friends and family, neighbors, coworkers and other acquaintances. Political discussion in everyday life takes place within these reference groups in the enduring social context. As discussed earlier, these reference groups are the people with whom information and contents are exchanged over social media most frequently. According to Hampton et al. (2016), diversity among social ties becomes more visible on social media as one posts and shares information, and "likes" or "dislikes" contents posted by others. In effect, individuals become more aware of difference and diversity in their social network. Awareness of difference and dissonant information induces hesitation, ambivalence and cognitive dissonance, particularly in face-to-face encounters with people with whom political difference has been identified over social media. It can ultimately lead individuals to shying away from engaging in offline, face-to-face discussion (Hampton et al., 2016; Mutz, 2002, 2006).

In the case of discussing politics in formal public meetings, individuals' political discussion partners are mostly people they do not share personal, enduring relationships with. Thus, the burden of having to deal with difference with specific respect to the personal, persistent relationship is likely to be much lighter in formal offline discussions. This rationale is in line with earlier studies on how encountering political difference affects individuals' decisions about different forms of political participation. The studies agree that encountering political difference through offline social networks was positively related to some socially-based political activities that take place outside of the social networks: campaigning, attending town hall meetings and other public forums, supporting a political party

and getting people to vote (Huckfeldt, 1979; Giles & Dantico, 1982; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Zipp & Smith, 1979). In addition, individuals benefit from the information function of sharing contents about politics over social media, i.e., being aware of political and social issues, understanding diverse perspectives, strengthening pre-existing opinions, developing arguments against opposite positions, and so on. It can encourage participation in public meetings that are attended mostly by people one does not know well or have enduring relationships with. In sum, social media use may encourage political discussion in formal public settings, while discouraging everyday discussion with social ties.

Heterogeneity encountered on traditional Internet vs. on social media

The form of political discussion this research is interested in is everyday, offline discussion with social ties. Thus far, it was reviewed that the potential difference revealed in the process of interaction among social ties through social media can affect everyday political discussion negatively, while heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet is likely facilitate the same. What makes heterogeneous experiences on the two respective media so different that they may affect individuals' political discussion decisions in opposite ways? This question warrants attention to the social context again. On traditional Internet, discussion and comment posting are generally anonymous, which suppresses the social relational aspect. Dissonant information encountered on traditional Internet comes from sources Internet users do not have personal relationships with. As such, dissonant information does not originate from their social ties, thus, the users do not necessarily have to determine their attitudes with due respect to

their social relationships. In contrast, on social media, political difference becomes more visible among social ties (Hampton et al., 2016) and subsequently, the users come under pressure in determining their attitude in due respect to maintaining relationships with the ties. On the other hand, Internet users can agree, disagree or change their attitudes more freely, easily and independently of personal relationship concerns. They may have to deal with the dissonance that originates from the counter-attitudinal information itself, but are free from the dissonance caused by considerations for the strengths and directions of their social relationships. Thus, while heterogeneous information encountered on the Internet can be helpful for increased everyday political discussion, the same experienced via social media may rather be detrimental.

Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H2: Overall social media use is negatively related to everyday political discussion

However, questions remain. It was diversity among social ties revealed in the process of interaction through social media that explained the negative relation between social media use and offline political discussion. Then, how is social media use with strong ties, that may have a lower level of diversity, related to offline political discussion? Close friends and family tend to share more similarity than arms-length associations such as coworkers and acquaintances (McLeod, Scheufele, Moy, Horowitz et al, 1999). Similarity among close ties has been systematically explained by Newcomb (1953). Difference encountered between social ties generates strain for a symmetry based on the strength and direction of the relationship. When an attitude one holds for

an issue does not match the attitude the other person holds when the relationship is strongly positive, the strain is intensified. Because strong ties generally have positive orientations toward each other, they are likely to have greater strain toward a symmetry with respect to issues they discuss. In turn, the intensified strain maximizes cognitive dissonance, which entails the subsequent need to reduce the dissonance through communication. The symmetry thesis contends that close ties are more likely to achieve increased co-orientation and homogeneity through frequent communication. Based on this thesis, communication between close ties would be bolstered by social media in the contemporary media environment, as the users move between social media and the offline world anywhere, anytime. With the feature of “follow” and “like” on social media, it is also possible that the opinion leader and two-step flow process is put in place and activated (Katz, 1957). Through this mechanism, the process of persuasion and the exchange of influence are more likely to occur. In effect, close ties are likely to have more opportunities to equalize their opinions and attitudes. Therefore, for close ties, social media may present a higher level of “visible,” rather than “perceived” (Goel, Mason, & Watts, 2010), homophile and agreement, and a lower level of diversity. Based on this discussion, next section will examine how social media use in close networks may alter the potential positive influence of heterogeneous online exposure on everyday political discussion.

Homogeneity on social media and heterogeneity on traditional Internet

For most social media users, the purpose of the use is to share information and contents with family, friends and other acquaintances. A majority of a social media user’s audience is her

existing social ties in everyday life. Close ties tend to keep more frequent contacts than do acquaintances. Their offline interactions carry over to social media and vice versa. Differently put, they maintain their close relationships through frequent interactions switching back and forth between online and offline. Literature on the consequences of communication with close ties via mobile phone and other online media helps conjecture about how bonding interactions over social media might influence individuals' everyday political discussion behavior. If bonding relationships are facilitated and strengthened through social media use at the expense of encountering weak ties, it means extensive use of social media among close ties can reduce opportunities to interact with heterogeneous, differently-minded people. Indeed, upon finding a positive relation between mobile phone use and social cohesion of strong ties, Ling (2008) cautioned that the cultivation of strong ties could be at the expense of opportunities for generating weak ties. Likewise, extensive communication among small like-minded strong ties can have a cocooning effect (Campbell & Kwak, 2011; Gergen, 2008, Ling, 2008). The cocooning effect has been demonstrated in other research on mobile phone use. Kobayashi & Boase (2014) found that heavy mobile text users among Japanese youths had a narrower scope of "most people," a lower level of social tolerance, and a higher level of caution in dealing with others. Campbell & Kwak (2012) showed that mobile-mediated political discussion in small, like-minded strong-tie networks was associated with decreased levels of open dialogue on politics with people one does not know well. Similarly, Campbell & Kwak (2012) found a negative association between political discussion in small, like-minded strong-tie networks and political mobilization. Gergen (2008) also suggested the possibility that monadic clusters of close ties constrain public dialogue by

drawing people inward. Therefore, it is expected that while heterogeneous online exposure can be helpful for increased offline political discussion, the positive influence is limited for heavy social media users with close ties. Hence, the following hypothesis will be tested.

H3: The relation between heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet and everyday political discussion is negatively moderated by close-tie social media use

Encountering difference in everyday political discussion

The meaning of deliberation in democracy lies in free, open discussion of politics among people of diverse opinions, values and positions. Discussing politics with only people that share ideas may result in fragmentation and polarization of society (Sunstein, 2007). Political discussion is more meaningful and help serve the pro-democratic value of public deliberation when diverse and conflicting ideas are met and compared with one another. To this end, studies have attempted to understand if diversity exists and is encountered by individuals when they discuss politics. Some studies examined the degrees to which individuals are exposed to political difference in their everyday political talks (e.g., Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2002, 2004; Mutz, 2006). Some other research attempted to tap into macro-level diversity in administratively defined areas by introducing the concept of “structural heterogeneity” (e.g., Brundidge, 2010; Scheufele et al., 2006). The concept is a measure of heterogeneity at the structural level in terms of presidential candidate preferences and race/ethnicity. It is estimated by the probability that two individuals randomly chosen from a county are from different presidential candidate preference groups or

race/ethnicity groups. The structural aspect of heterogeneity in society was also documented in studies that examined diversity in strong ties and weak ties separately (Jun, 2014a, 2014b). The studies revealed that encountering difference is less controllable in weak ties such as coworkers than in strong ties such as close friends because friends can be chosen while coworkers cannot be. Specifically, while Internet news use and heterogeneous interaction online were positively related to strong-tie diversity, the same had no relations with the less controllable weak-tie diversity (Jun, 2014b). In order to understand the ways in which the interplay between heterogeneous traditional Internet experience and homogenous social media experience may or may not promote the pro-democratic value of public deliberation, it is imperative that present study confirm that exposure to difference does occur in everyday, offline political discussion. Therefore, the following hypothesis will be tested.

H4: Offline heterogeneous exposure is positively related to everyday political discussion

Method

For this research, a survey was conducted among 123 undergraduate students in a university in South Korea in March, 2016. The age of the sample ranged between 19 and 26.² Eighty-one students were female, while 42 were male. The sample included 56 freshmen, 47 sophomores, 15 juniors and 5 seniors. A hierarchical regression analysis was performed to predict political discussion.

² The minimum age to vote in South Korea is nineteen.

Measures

Heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet

Heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet was measured by two items respectively measuring the cognitive dimension and the behavioral dimension in order to ensure reliability. Respondents were asked on a 5-point scale, ranging from “definitely disagree” to “definitely agree,” to state how much they agreed with the following two statements: “When I use traditional Internet, I encounter political views and contents that are different from my own” (cognitive) and “When I encounter political views and contents that are different from my own, I read them closely with interest” (behavioral). The mean of the two items was computed as the measure of heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.00$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.800$).

Close-tie social media use

Earlier in literature review, it was discussed that intensive strong-tie communication could be cultivated at the expense of important weak ties (Gergen, 2008; Ling, 2008). Attending to this relative aspect of communication, the measure of close-tie social media use is in terms of proportion rather than the time spent for. Social media use with close ties was measured by an item that asked respondents the proportion of the time spent on Facebook, Tweeter, Instagram, Band or Kakaostory to communicate with their close friends and family in their overall social media use on a 7-point scale, ranging from 0% to 90%~100%. Twenty-seven percent of respondents spent about 50% to 75% of their social media time to communicate to their close friends and family, while 17% of respondents did the same for about 75% to 90%.

Fifteen percent of respondents spent less than 10% of their social media time, while another 15% spent between 25% and 50%. The rest thirteen percent of respondents spent 90% to 100% of their social media time with people they were closest to.

Interaction term

To test the proposed hypotheses, the moderation effect of heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet and close-tie social media use was examined. For this analysis, an interaction term was created between the two main effect variables. The two variables were standardized prior to the creation of the interaction term to reduce potential multicollinearity problems in the association between the interaction term and its component variables (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005).

Political discussion

To measure political discussion occurring in everyday communication, students were asked to indicate how much they agreed with the statement, "I discuss political and social issues with people around me" on a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from "definitely disagree" to "definitely agree" ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.00$).

Offline heterogeneous exposure

Respondents were asked to state how much they agreed with the statement, "I encounter political views that are different from mine when talking with people around me" on a 5-point scale, ranging from "definitely disagree" to "definitely agree" ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.00$).

Control variables

Some demographic variables, media use and some political attributes have been found to be related to individuals' engagement in political discussion and participation (Brundidge, 2010; Kim, 2011). To identify the contributions made to the dependent variable, offline political discussion, by the two main effect variables independently of the above variables, the following variables were controlled for in the model.

Media use

This study tests combined effects of traditional Internet and social media on offline political discussion with people around. One possibility is that spending more time on traditional Internet and social media could reduce the time for engaging in conversations with people offline. Because this time displacement factor can intervene the relationships of variables this study interested in, media use variables were controlled. Overall Internet use was measured from an item that asked respondents to report how much time they spent on the Internet on an average day in the past one week on an 11-point scale, ranging from none to over 8 hours (32% of respondents spent 8 hours or more, 15% between 3 and 4 hours). Overall social media use was measured by the item that asked respondents how much of their time on the Internet was spent on Facebook, Tweeter, Instagram, Band or Kakaostory on a 7-point scale, ranging from 0% to 90%~100 (29% of respondent used 50% to 75% of their total Internet time on social media, while 20% spent 75% to 90%).³

³ Naver Blog, Band and Kakaostory are the three most used Korean social media services in a broad sense (*Joongang Ilbo*, March 20, 2018 <http://news.joins.com/article/22456272>). Naver Blog is a blogging service customized for mobile use. It was eliminated from the survey because, as a blogging tool rather than a contents

Political attitudes and participation

Students that are most likely to discuss politics with people around them are those who are interested in public affairs and social issues. In order to prevent political attitudes from intervening the relationships of interest, several political attitude and participation variables were controlled. Political interest was measured by two items tapping the attitudinal dimension and the behavioral dimension. Students were asked to show agreement with the statements, "I am interested in political and social issues" (attitudinal), and "when I am online, I read about political and social issues with interest" (behavioral) on the 5-point scale, ranging from "definitely disagree" to "definitely agree." Responses were averaged to create an additive index ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.90$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.90$). For political tolerance, based on previous studies (e.g., Mutz, 2004), the 5-point scale was used for the items that asked respondents to indicate how much they agreed with five statements about allowing freedom of speech, holding rallies and demonstrations, and running for public office to people with political views that are different from respondent. ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.60$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$). For political participation, respondents were asked to check all activities they had participated from a list of eleven political activities: voting at a presidential, general, or local election, sending a letter to newspaper, commenting on political news on the Internet, wearing a button or a sticker that carries political messages, clicking "like" or "recommend" or displaying a banner on political issues, participating in a political rally, attending a public forum or conference on political issues, joining a political organization, signing a petition on political issues, donating to

exchange tool, it did not serve the purpose of this study.

political organizations, and contacting a politician. The number of activities reported participated by the respondent was recorded ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.90$).

Demographics

For other control variables, the following variables were included: age, gender, college year, close network size, Internet use, social media use, political interest, political tolerance and political participation. To measure close network size, respondents were asked to report how many people in the respondent's social network were so close that respondents meet or contact them almost every day on a 12-point scale, spanning from none to over 20. Twenty-five percent of respondents reported 5 or 6 people, 21% 3 or 4 people, 15% 9 or 10 people, 12% 1 or 2 people and another 15% reported 7 to 8 people.

Results

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses. Results are summarized in Table 1. Heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet was found to have no statistically significant relationship with offline political discussion ($\beta = .141$, $p = .09$). Overall social media use was not significantly related. The first and second hypotheses are not supported.

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Political Discussion

Variables	Political Discussion
Block 1: Control variables	
Demographics	
Age	-.01
Gender	.09
College year	.06
Size of close ties	-.02
Media use	
Overall Internet use	.05
Overall social media use	-.02
Political variables	
Political interest	.54***
Political tolerance	.14*
Political participation	.09
Offline heterogeneous exposure	.34***
R^2	.65
Block 2: Main effect variables	
Heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet	.14#
Close-tie social media use	.04
R^2	.66
Block 3: Interaction term	
Heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet x close-tie social media use	-.52*
R^2	.68

Note: Entries are standardized beta coefficient. $N = 123$

$p \leq .10$, * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

The third hypothesis is supported. The interaction term between close-tie social media use and heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet was negatively associated with political discussion for the college students ($\beta = -.520$, $p = .02$). The negative moderation effect is figuratively illustrated in Figure 1, which reports the results of the univariate analysis of variance ($F = 5.81$, $p = .001$).

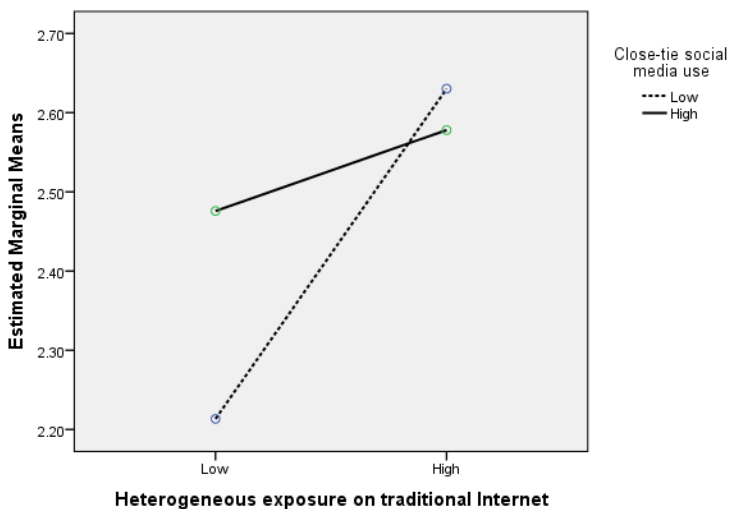


Figure 1. Marginal Means of Political Discussion

The sharp slope of the line indicating low close-tie social media use in the figure shows a marked increase in the marginal means of political discussion. The subgroup of low close-tie social media use had a low level of marginal means of political discussion when heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet was low. However, the marginal means peaked when the same subgroup was exposed to a high level of heterogeneous exposure. This is markedly contrasted by the moderate slope of the line indicating high close-tie social media use. The high close-tie social media use subgroup showed a much higher level of marginal means of political discussion than the low close-tie social media use subgroup when heterogeneous exposure was low. When the exposure increased to a high level, the marginal means increased rather moderately for the high close-tie social media use subgroup. It suggests the possibility that intensive close-tie social media use does not serve the goal of increased

political discussion for certain groups of people.

The fourth hypothesis is also supported. Offline heterogeneous exposure was positively related to political discussion ($\beta = .341, p \leq .001$). The more political discussion the students had, the more likely that they encountered political difference. It shows that political discussion in everyday life increases the chance of coming across ideas and opinions that are different from their own. Put differently, it may be said that offline heterogeneous exposure can promote increased political discussion for the students.

Also significant in the model were political interest and political tolerance. Not surprisingly, political interest was the strongest predictor of political discussion in the model ($\beta = .537, p \leq .001$). Political tolerance was also positively related ($\beta = .136, p = .03$). Political participation had no association with political discussion.

Discussion

Despite the purposive control available on the Internet, exposure to difference does occur due to structural, inadvertent (Brundidge, 2010) and deliberate (Garrett, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009) reasons. According to the model tested in this study, however, such exposure to difference on traditional Internet was conducive to increased offline political discussion only limitedly for students in the sample.

Heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet can positively, indirectly and differentially influence varying levels of close-tie social media users. Students with lower close-tie social media use were much more likely to benefit from exposure to different ideas on traditional Internet. Students with higher

close-tie social network use were most likely to shun away from political discussion. In agreement with earlier research (Campbell & Kwak, 2012; Gergen, 2008; Ling, 2008), present study reaffirms the negative influences of strong cohesive communication and the potential cocooning effect on diversity.

However, strong cohesive communication over social media may not necessarily reduce political discussion. When heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet was low, heavier close-tie social media users were markedly more likely to discuss politics than lighter close-tie social media users. In addition, social media use did not necessarily take away college students' time from engaging in offline political discussion.

Nevertheless, whether this sharp increase is conducive to political deliberation warrants closer attention. It must be understood with caution for at least two reasons. First, the marked increase in political discussion in the lower heterogeneous exposure on traditional Internet condition could stem from defensive confidence (Albarracín & Mitchell, 2004; Jun, 2012; Scheufele et al., 2006) facilitated by reinforced beliefs and affirmation circulating through the communication within close tie networks (Gergen, 2008).

Second, there is a possibility that the students deliberately seek confirmation and support for their viewpoints after they have discussed political issues in offline settings. This possibility is supported by previous research. Upon finding a positive relation between exposure to attitude-consistent information online and heterogeneous exposure offline, Scheufele et al. (2006) concluded that exposure to difference leads to subsequent use of media to strengthen rationale for existing positions. Jun (2014b) also found a positive relationship between selective exposure online and diversity in weak ties. These two reasons indicate that the increased discussion may not necessarily translate to

understanding of opposing viewpoints, increased perspective-taking ability and tolerance, which are necessary ingredients for deliberative democracy. It also explains why the cocooning effect was not manifest when heterogeneous exposure level was lower. In this case, the purpose of public deliberation is underserved, if not defeated. It could rather lead to multiple echo chambers and cocoons in open dialogues in everyday social settings.

While intensive close-tie social media use may present the danger of multiple echo chambers, if the heavy users break out of the cocoon of circular affirmation and expose themselves to other possibilities, social media use can expand and enrich the public sphere by offering chances to re-evaluate one's own viewpoints based on the understanding of other diverse ideas. Heterogeneous experiences on traditional Internet may help overcome the cocooning effect for heavy close-tie social media users. To conclude, the moderation effect suggests that it is not the media themselves, i.e., traditional Internet or social media, that facilitate or hamper the democratic process of public deliberation, but exactly how the students choose to use it.

The study confirms that differences are encountered in everyday political talks with family, friends and other acquaintances. Unlike the online world, control of information is much further limited in the offline world. Although who one discusses politics with seems to be subject to one's choice, she cannot fully choose everyday conditions such as who she studies in the same university with, works for the same company with, live in the same neighborhood with, go to the same church with, take part in the organization events with, and so on (Jun, 2014a, 2014b; Mutz, 2006). Exposure to diversity is also conditioned by the structural aspect of society (Scheufele et al., 2004). Individuals are likely to come across difference as long as they discuss politics with people they meet in everyday settings. Through

such everyday talks about politics, different thoughts and ideas compete in the public sphere, forming public opinion.

The findings of this study must be understood with reservations because this research is an exploratory study with a small sample of 123 Korean university students. As young voters, college students tend to seek opinions of their primary groups, i.e., close friends and family, for political issues (Berelson et al., 1954). Coherent attitudes can strengthen sense of belonging to their groups, which in turn can increase sense of security. By the same token, differing attitudes and beliefs may cause the feeling of insecurity and fear of isolation. This tendency of college students could have exaggerated the moderation effect in this research, accounting for the relatively large magnitude of the moderation.

There are operational concerns that can be improved in future research. The measures of exposure online and offline, and political discussion were only attitudinal. Adding behavioral measures or using direct measures can be more accurate. Adding more dimensions and items to political discussion would increase reliability. In future research, it is suggested to investigate the mechanisms through which circular affirmation occurring in the cocooning effect intervenes the positive effects of heterogeneous exposure. Adding political knowledge in the model could particularly be useful for college students as young voters. Delving into the purpose of social media use, particularly the extent to which political contents are shared through social media, may as well bear meaningful results for understanding how social media may assist college students in increasing their capacity for democracy and responsible citizenry.

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