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Discussing Politics on SNSs Across National Contexts: A Comparison Between Facebook and Twitter Users in France and Japan

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Previous works have suggested that social network sites (SNSs) users are exposed to political content incidentally through messages posted by network friends, regardless of their interest in politics. I propose to explore to what extent discussing politics on social media depends on (1) news-seeking attitudes, (2) personal news curation, and (3) users' interest in politics. Using a cross-national sample of French and Japanese SNS users, I test a series of hypotheses with multiple group analysis. The results show that while political discussions on SNSs mainly arise independently from intentional news seeking, political interest determines the chances of discussing politics with network friends. Moreover, discussing politics on SNSs is more dependent on news-seeking attitudes for the Japanese group. These results put into question the generalizability of previous findings regarding social media's role in providing political information for large audiences.

Keywords: social network sites, political discussions, comparative analysis, structural equation modeling, multiple group analysis

Social network sites (SNSs) are depicted as key elements for keeping citizens informed about public issues (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). Several authors have noticed SNSs' ability to foster incidental exposure to political content (Yamamoto & Morey, 2019). SNSs enable a fast and large spread of political information so much that even those who are not motivated to seek this specific content could stay tuned for news and public affairs. In line with this argument, researchers argue that SNSs help reduce the information gap between citizens with high and low interest in politics (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016).

Research on incidental exposures often ignores the conditions under which SNSs expose users to political information (Kümpel, 2020). Even though users declare coming across political content while navigating for other purposes, such exposures might occur under specific conditions. The extent to which users intentionally use SNSs for seeking news, the way they customize their accounts—for instance, by following news providers—or their level of interest in public affairs can increase their chances of encountering and engaging with political content. As a result, far from fostering the spread of political information among poorly informed audiences, SNSs would enrich the knowledge of users already interested in politics. In the

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same vein, if several works acknowledge the role of discussions in spreading political information in online settings (Scheffauer, Goyanes, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021), the conditions under which political discussions emerge on SNSs remain largely unknown.

We know even less about how political discussions occur on SNSs outside the Western context. In East Asia, the Confucian-type of public sphere does not match the traditional standards of liberal democracy (Chu, Diamond, Nathan, & Shin, 2008). For instance, in Japan, the salience of conflict avoidance, besides a weak party competition, has been accused of being the root of low levels of political engagement (Ikeda, 2006). At the same time, Japanese citizens display high rates of connectivity and SNS usage. Knowing whether and how SNS use leads to discussing politics in East-Asian societies like Japan, as compared with Western societies, remains open.

This article addresses these issues by evaluating the pathways through which people discuss politics on SNSs in different cultural settings. I use cross-national data collected among French and Japanese users of Facebook and Twitter for assessing to what extent discussing politics on social media depends on (1) news-seeking attitudes, (2) informational curation of the SNS environment, and (3) users' interest in politics. I run comparisons between French and Japanese groups using multiple group analyses. I finally discuss the importance of users' interests and national context for witnessing political discussions on SNSs. Regarding these results, the role of social media in the spread of political information is reevaluated.

Literature Review

Political Discussions, the Internet, and the Information Gap

Ordinary discussions are, along with media, the primary source of political information. Political information includes knowledge about politics, public policies, or social issues, but it also provides clues about opinion climate, helping citizens to identify majority trends within their local environment and the larger society (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Contrary to the information provided by media, information available through discussions requires less effort from individuals. Political content emerges most of the time during trivial discussions (Walsh, 2004). Ordinary discussions, from this perspective, have been described as a means of accessing political information at a lower cost (Downs, 1957), and studies have for a long time shown the positive relationship between discussing politics and political participation, trust, or civic literacy (Zuckerman, 2005).

Nevertheless, discussing politics does not escape social determinants. As age (Jennings & Markus, 1988), education (Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000), or social position increase, people become more interested in politics (Milbrath & Goel, 1977), increasing their chances of discussing public issues with others (Straits, 1991). Consequently, citizens are not equally informed, and the unequal ability to discuss politics would explain gaps in participation, trust, or knowledge among citizens from different social groups in modern democracies.

Numeric technologies have been associated with a more extensive spread of political information through news media consumption and political talks among digital ties. Digital discussions, which can be

defined as messages shared by noninstitutional sources, were associated with a fast-track spread of information since the Internet seemed to expand personal networks (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). Because extensive networks foster weak ties, Internet users are likely to be confronted with unexpected information and interact with political content even if they are not accustomed to discussing politics. In addition, because it allows users to hide or downplay some aspects of their identity that otherwise would have discouraged interactions with political content, the digital world encourages political discussions (Robertson, Vatrappu, & Medina, 2010).

Several works have cast doubt on this optimistic picture. In her seminal book, Norris (2001) mentioned the digital divide raised by the inequalities in access and usage of Internet technologies, worsening the gap between informed and non-informed audiences. Later studies gave credit to this thesis. Prior (2007) showed that online media's high-choice environment allows entertainment seekers to avoid news content, a result confirmed by other studies (Bonfadelli, 2002; Cho & Park, 2013). If Internet users filter the content they access online, there is little chance that people hardly interested in politics visit websites where news and public issues are discussed. These findings suggest, on the contrary, that the Internet heightens the information gap among citizens.

More recently, empirical findings have given a glimpse of a more optimistic perspective, considering that an increased number of Internet users come across political content while navigating for other purposes (Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001). Study after study, incidental news exposures (INE) have been reported (Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013). In line with this idea, recent works emphasize the proliferation of attitudes labeled as "news finds me perception," namely users' belief that they can stay informed without actively seeking information by relying on social media and personal contacts (Gil de Zúñiga, Strauss, & Huber, 2020, p. 1607). INE are sometimes described as a participation equalizer, offering learning opportunities to those who are not interested in politics (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016).

Online discussions play a crucial part in these mechanisms. Bimber (2008) showed that the Internet offers multiple opportunities for political communication, among which some escape individual filtering ability. Brundidge (2010) argued that citizens are exposed to political discussions inadvertently since the Internet facilitates communication between political and apolitical networks, public and private spheres. According to Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009), online political discussions arise in unexpected places, like apolitical blogs or chat rooms. These websites would be facilitators of political talks, even for those who do not seek political content.

Assessing Pathways Toward Political Discussions on SNSs

From this perspective, SNSs have received specific attention in recent literature. SNSs are defined as

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

Most SNS users turn to these websites not to find political content but to socialize or entertain themselves (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), but SNSs offer various functions for staying informed about public issues, like following accounts of news providers, activists, or politicians. Thus, SNSs favor the porosity between public and private spheres, enhancing the circulation of political content. The structure of SNS networks also facilitates the spread of political information since SNSs help people to build or maintain contact with weak or distant ties.

A growing number of empirical works suggest that political content that circulates on SNSs is the product of incidental exposures spread by network others (Bode, 2016). The role of network friends would even be of greater importance than mass media pages for disseminating news on SNSs (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018) since SNS users are more likely to engage with news shared by trustworthy others (Karnowski, Kümpel, Leonhard, & Leiner, 2017). For instance, Kümpel (2019) shows that getting tagged in comments to news posts is the primary way SNS users consume news. Several works have also found correlations between interactional uses of SNSs and political discussions on these platforms (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Park, 2015).

These results do not necessarily suggest that chances of discussing politics on social networks are evenly distributed. INE are usually measured by asking survey participants how often they encounter news or political content online without actively seeking it (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). This type of measurement has already been criticized (Kümpel, 2020) since intentional and INE are not mutually exclusive: Politically interested users are more likely to come across news exposures than others, even incidentally (Heiss & Matthes, 2019). To overcome this limit, I propose a theoretical framework comprising a series of hypotheses to test how discussing politics on SNSs depends on users' interests and motives.

First, people might discuss politics on SNSs because they intentionally search for political content. SNS use has been associated with news consumption in many studies (Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2015; Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). Intentional news seeking has been positively associated with several forms of political participation on SNSs (Shahin, Saldaña, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021). Previous studies recognize that using SNSs for seeking news spurs political discussion (Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017). As news-seeking attitudes require a specific interest in politics, it is reasonable to think that intentional news seekers are more likely to pay attention to political content displayed on social media. Accordingly, I hypothesize that:

H1: SNS use for news mediates the effect of SNS use on SNS political discussions.

Intentional news-seeking attitudes explain why users decide to follow news providers or political actors to stay connected with political content (Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012). Until now, studies show that only a few of those who claim to use SNSs for news report such informational curation attitudes (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018). Nevertheless, studies have reported a strong relationship between interest in politics and personal news curation (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Beyond news-seeking attitudes, informational curation of the SNS environment might be a facilitator for finding political discussants. Therefore, I hypothesize that:

H2: Informational curation mediates the effect of SNS for news on SNS political discussions.

Finally, even though they do not actively search for news, politically interested users are more likely to engage with news or political content (Karnowski et al., 2017). Less interested users generally avoid online political communication (Marcinkowski & Došenović, 2021). The politically active can also find more news providers among their friends: Although SNSs promote weak ties, users interact with others sharing similar interests (Lönnqvist & Itkonen, 2016). Considering these elements, I posit the following hypothesis:

H3: Users' civic engagement moderates the direct effect of SNS use on SNS political discussions.

Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized relationships between SNS use, SNS use for news, informational curation, civic engagement, and SNS political discussions, with associated paths and coefficients.

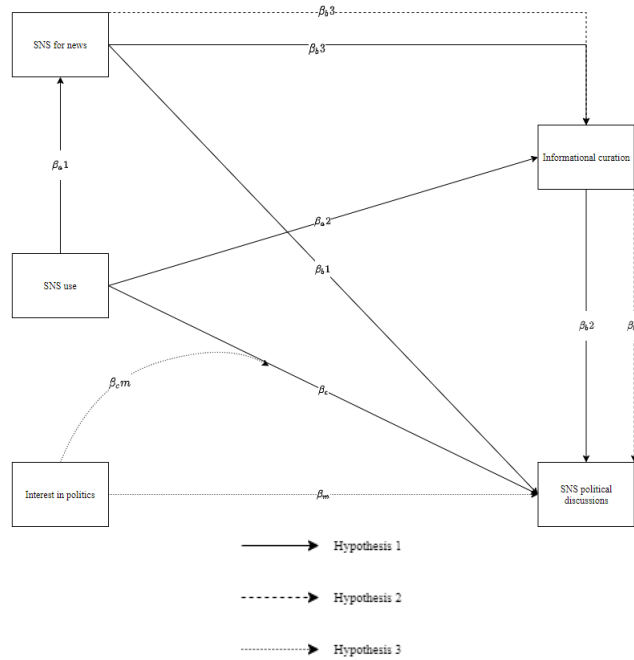


Figure 1. The hypothesized model.

National Context, SNS Use, and Political Discussion: Comparing Western and East-Asian Societies

To what extent does the model proposed above remain relevant across national contexts? While initially elaborated from the American case, theories about the spread of political information in online settings have been tested in different national contexts (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020). However, only a few theories concern political discussions on SNSs.

Previous findings suggest that national context affects the hypothesized relationships depicted in Figure 1. Works based on the seminal distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Hofstede, 1980) consider that the former foster more extensive networks (Allik & Realo, 2004) and stimulate political discussions to a larger extent than the latter (Eveland, Song, & Beck, 2015). Another important distinction depends on countries' political systems. According to Nir (2012), multiple party systems imply more substantial electoral competitiveness, stimulating more political discussions.

Besides, the extent people use social media varies by country, partly depending on demographic criteria: For instance, because young adults are more likely to use SNSs, countries with a large youth population show higher SNS use rates (Poushter, Bishop, & Chwe, 2018). Studies agree that online networks are larger in individualistic countries, where SNS use seems more connected with bridging social capital than in collectivistic countries (Liu, Ainsworth, & Baumeister, 2016). Individuals from collectivistic countries would also be more reluctant to use social media to display personal information (Sheldon, Rauschnabel, Antony, & Car, 2017).

The national context also influences news-seeking attitudes. Following Hsu, Wang, Chih, and Lin (2015), information-seeking is more common for individuals from individualistic cultures, whereas users from collectivist cultures prioritize socialization. According to Hölzig (2016), online populations from countries facing a lack of performance of traditional media institutions and low Internet penetration rates would be more active than others. Relying on Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology, Nielsen and Schröder (2014) came to similar results, finding that "democratic corporatist" media systems, characterized by a combination of strong commercial news media and public media service, displayed lower levels of SNS use for news than "polarized pluralist" media systems, with weaker and more politicized public media service (p. 478).

Considering these elements, it is possible to estimate the relevance of the hypothesized model by comparing countries with distinct cultural, media, or political settings. For that, I propose to compare France and Japan, two countries opposed in many aspects. France can be seen as an individualistic country (Hofstede, 1980), while Japan, culturally influenced by Confucianism (Hirokawa, Vannieuwenhuysse, Dohi, & Miyata, 2001), can be defined as a collectivistic country. Nevertheless, France and Japan are not archetypes of individualistic and collectivistic cultures. For Kagitcibasi (2005), French people make a more apparent distinction between close and distant ties and are less open to casual friendships than people from other individualistic countries. Students of cultural values acknowledge Japanese society becoming more liberal, even though Confucian values still influence social relationships in Japan (Chu et al., 2008; Helgesen & Thomsen, 2006).

Notwithstanding these findings, we can expect that the hypothesized relationships between SNS use and SNS political discussions differ across the two countries. First, Confucian values that pervade in East-Asia instigate conflict-avoidance (Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994), and authors have suggested that they were obstacles to discussing politics in Japan (Abe, Shindo, & Kawato, 1993). Recent studies still report lower political talks' frequency in Japan than in Western countries (Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2018). Second, while France and Japan are multiparty systems and stable democracies, the Japanese Liberal Democrat Party has been in power almost uninterruptedly since 1955. Following Nir's (2012) argument, the weak party competition within Japanese politics explains Japan's lower level of political discussion.

Furthermore, Japanese people declare lower SNS usage rates than French people (Poushter et al., 2018). The structure of the Japanese population, which is older than the French one, is a first reason for this difference. Additionally, in Japan, Western social media such as Facebook or Twitter faced the concurrence of local platforms like Miki and Gree. Even though the popularity of Facebook in Japan has grown over the years, its penetration rate remains lower than in Western countries. Some authors have argued that sharing personal information and the real-name policy adopted by Facebook go against Japanese culture (Thomson, Yuki, & Ito, 2015). These elements give credit to the hypothesis of a weaker relationship between SNS use and political discussions in Japan. Accordingly, I posit the following hypothesis:

H4: The direct effect of SNS use on SNS political discussions is weaker for Japanese than French users.

Besides, studies also report the lower tendency of Japanese people to use SNSs as a news source. According to the Reuters Digital Report (2020), 55% of French people use Facebook as a news source, and 9% use Twitter for the same purpose. Meanwhile, 15% of Japanese people use Twitter for news, but only 7% use Facebook for the same purpose. Nielsen and Schröder (2014) explain these differences by referring to the characteristics of media spheres in the two countries, classifying Japan as a "democratic corporatist" system and France as a "polarized pluralist" system (p. 478). In the same vein, Ogasahara (2018) categorizes the Japanese media environment as "not politically polarized" (p. 84). Following previous studies, Japanese people do not trust the content on the Internet compared with people from other countries (Ishii, 2017). Japanese SNS users would also be less familiar with personal news curation practices. In her cross-cultural study on news curation, Merten (2021) found that only 39% of Japanese social media users interested in the news had curated their SNS environment for browsing or avoiding news. Thus, I will test the hypothesis below:

H5: The mediating effect of SNS for news on the relationship between SNS use and SNS political discussion is weaker for Japanese than French users.

And its corollary:

H6: The mediating effect of informational curation on the relationship between SNS for news and SNS political discussion is weaker for Japanese than French users.

These two hypotheses do not mean that discussing politics on SNSs in Japan is less related to users' interest in politics. Previous works have shown that Japanese SNS networks are less open to weak ties than Western networks. Barker and Ota (2011) emphasized the inclination toward privacy and closed relationships among young Japanese women on social media. Later studies confirmed that Japanese online networks display higher closeness rates than Western networks (Ishii, 2014). On the contrary, previous works have found that a non-negligible part of French users turned to SNSs to find connections outside kin groups (Vasalou, Joinson, & Courvoisier, 2010). Therefore, we can expect hardly interested users to be even less likely to find political discussants on Japanese social media. Thus, I hypothesize that:

H7: The moderating effect of interest in politics on the relationship between SNS use and SNS political discussion is higher for Japanese than French users.

Materials and Method

Data

This research is based on an online survey administered by Qualtrics² in 2018—from May 20 to 31, 2018—and in 2019—from June 3 to 11, 2019—to 1,640 French and Japanese SNS users above 18 years old. For comparability purposes, I focused on two SNSs used in each country, Facebook and Twitter.³ According to the American Association of Public Opinion Research's response rate calculator, the average time for survey completion was 25 minutes, and the average response rate was 57%.

A comparison with census data (Table 1) shows that in both countries, respondents are younger—except for Japanese Facebook users—and more educated than the average population above 15. In line with previous findings (Nielsen & Schröder, 2014), men are overrepresented among Japanese users.⁴

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Two Samples Versus Census Data.

	France				Japan			
	Census	Total Sample	Facebook	Twitter	Census	Total Sample	Facebook	Twitter
Male	47.6	44	39	49	48.8	69	74.7	63.3
18–34 years	25.3	32.9	24.6	41.2	19.8	20.7	11.4	30.1
35–54 years	33.1	47.6	51	44.1	32.4	54.4	54.3	54.5
55 and more	41.6	19.5	24.4	14.6	47.8	24.9	34.3	15.4
College degree	28.3	41.2	46.8	55.6	24.5	50.2	56.2	44.3

N = 1,640

Note. Census percentages for males and age categories were computed from the population above 18 years old. Census percentages for higher education degrees were computed from the active population above 15 years old. Census data for France comes from the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies ([INSEE], 2015). Census data for Japan comes from the Statistics Bureau (2015).

² Respondents were recruited from Qualtrics online panel. After a first sampling wave in May 2018 (400 respondents in each country), I recruited additional respondents in June 2019 (420 in each country) to increase the sample size. The 2019 respondents were older (45 years old on average) than the 2018 ones (43 years old), and there were less men (55% versus 58%).

³ Each national sample was divided into two equal groups: 410 Facebook users and 410 Twitter users. Users were assigned to one group depending on the SNS they used the most. When users declared using both equally, they were randomly assigned to one group.

⁴ Despite being large, these disparities do not affect the zero-order correlations between the variables used in this study (cf. Appendix). No major differences in correlations were found after applying sampling bias corrections for gender, age, and education.

Research Design

I assess the hypotheses with multiple group analysis, following a three-step strategy. First, a multiple group confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFAs; see Dimitrov, 2006) is performed to assess the reliability of measurements, and compare their means across French and Japanese groups. The predictor, mediators, and outcome are modeled as latent constructs.

SNS use (Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{France}} = .86$; $\alpha_{\text{Japan}} = .87$) is made of four Likert scales measuring how frequently (from 1 = less than once a month, to 4 = at least once a day) respondents have done the following things on SNSs over the last six months: Posted ($M_{\text{France}} = 2.62$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 1.22$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 1.91$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 1.20$), commented ($M_{\text{France}} = 2.59$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 1.16$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 1.71$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 1.06$), shared ($M_{\text{France}} = 2.55$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 1.20$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 1.66$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 1.08$), and liked ($M_{\text{France}} = 2.73$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 1.21$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 1.84$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 1.14$).

Based on prior research (Yamamoto & Morey, 2019), *SNS for news* ($\alpha_{\text{France}} = .72$; $\alpha_{\text{Japan}} = .78$) is composed of three categorical items measuring if respondents have used as a source of news (1) Facebook, Twitter, or another SNS (*Range* = 1–4, $M_{\text{France}} = .43$, $SD_{\text{France}} = .49$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .25$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .44$); (2) another Web platform such as a blog, a video sharing platform, or an online newspaper (*Range* = 1–4, $M_{\text{France}} = 1.94$, $SD_{\text{France}} = .84$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 1.75$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .78$); (3) a traditional mass media including TV, radio, national and local newspapers (*Range* = 1–5, $M_{\text{France}} = 2.71$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 1.30$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 2.16$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 1.04$).

Informational curation ($\alpha_{\text{France}} = .82$; $\alpha_{\text{Japan}} = .81$) is composed of seven dummy items measuring if respondents have followed at least one page of (1) a news organization ($M_{\text{France}} = .59$, $SD_{\text{France}} = .49$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .43$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .50$); (2) a magazine ($M_{\text{France}} = .31$, $SD_{\text{France}} = .46$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .17$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .37$); (3) a T.V. or radio show ($M_{\text{France}} = .30$, $SD_{\text{France}} = .46$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .22$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .42$); (4) a journalist or an influencer ($M_{\text{France}} = .37$, $SD_{\text{France}} = .48$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .29$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .46$); (5) a politician or a political party ($M_{\text{France}} = .19$, $SD_{\text{France}} = .39$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .11$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .31$); (6) a non-profit organization ($M_{\text{France}} = .34$, $SD_{\text{France}} = .47$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .13$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .34$); or (7) a governmental office ($M_{\text{France}} = .17$, $SD_{\text{France}} = .37$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .13$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .34$).

SNS political discussions ($\alpha_{\text{France}} = .91$; $\alpha_{\text{Japan}} = .93$) are made of five items. I asked Respondents to provide names of up to five SNS contacts who published messages or comments about politics and social issues over the last six months. Respondents who provided at least one name ($n = 628$, 38% of the sample) were asked how often (from 1 = almost never to 4 = very often) they come across messages from discussants, and how often they liked, commented, or shared these messages. The two scores are summed, and each item represents the total frequency of political discussions for each discussant: (1) First discussant ($M_{\text{France}} = 4.15$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 5.38$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 1.15$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 2.90$); (2) second discussant ($M_{\text{France}} = 3.13$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 4.80$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .74$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 2.25$); (3) third discussant ($M_{\text{France}} = 2.22$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 4.22$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 1.15$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 2.09$); (4) fourth discussant ($M_{\text{France}} = 1.65$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 3.63$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .44$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 1.77$); (5) fifth discussant ($M_{\text{France}} = 1.52$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 3.65$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .37$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 1.63$).

In a second time, I performed multiple group structural equation modeling (MGSEM) to estimate structural differences in paths a_1 , a_2 , b_1 , b_2 , b_3 , c , and m (Figure 1) across French and Japanese groups

(Hypotheses H₁, H₂, H₄, H₅, and H₆). In this step, correlations between confounders and each latent construct are controlled. Covariates include gender (1 = male; $M_{\text{France}} = 0.47$, $SD_{\text{France}} = .50$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = .54$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .50$), age ($M_{\text{France}} = 48.39$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 15.90$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 49.24$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 16.1$), education (Range = 1–4; $M_{\text{France}} = 2.05$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 0.91$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 2.20$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .58$), income (Range = 1–6; $M_{\text{France}} = 2.34$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 1.05$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 3.15$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 1.15$), type of SNS used (1 = Twitter), and size of SNS networks ($M_{\text{France}} = 141.29$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 16.46$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 89.25$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = 11.05$).⁵ Direct effect of *Interest in politics* (Range = 1–4; $M_{\text{France}} = 2.60$, $SD_{\text{France}} = 1.00$; $M_{\text{Japan}} = 2.08$, $SD_{\text{Japan}} = .87$) on *SNS political discussions* is also estimated. Since *interest in politics* is a moderator, it is modeled as a single-indicator latent construct, with its residual variance set to 0 (Schoemann & Jorgensen, 2021).

The last step estimates the moderating effect of *interest in politics* (H₃ and H₇) by adding a latent interaction term between the moderator and *SNS use*, using a parceling strategy (Aytürk, Cham, Jennings, & Brown, 2020).

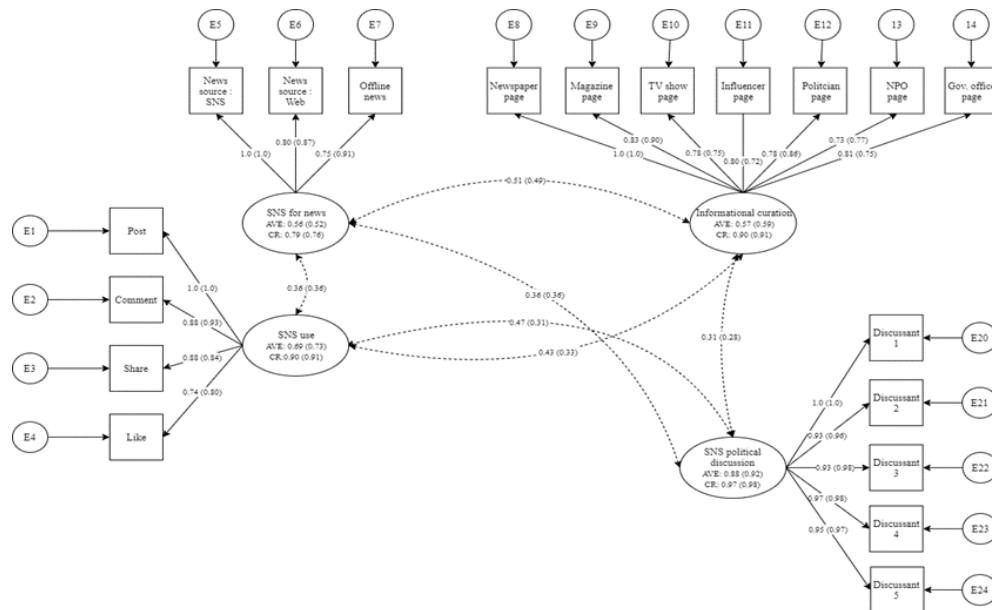
All analyses were realized with the lavaan package from R (Rosseel, 2012). This package estimates regression models with endogenous ordinal variables using a mean-and-variance-adjusted weight least squares estimator to compute robust standard errors (Brown, 2006), accounting for heteroscedasticity and non-normality.

Results

Multiple Group CFA

The CFA performed on the pooled sample displays reasonable fit measures ($\chi^2(146) = 597.77$, $CFI = .988$, $TLI = .986$, $RMSEA = .043$ [90% $CI = .040, .047$], $SRMR = .066$). The model also fits the data well for the two groups taken separately, with good fit measures for both cases and acceptable reliability indices (Figure 2).

⁵ Covariates are residualized and mean-centered to reduce multicollinearity.



French group
 $\chi^2 (146) = 308.53;$
 $CFI = .989; TLI = .987; SRMR = .067$
 $RMSEA = .037 [90\% CI = .031, .043]$

Japanese group
 $\chi^2 (146) = 465.67;$
 $CFI = .981; TLI = .977; SRMR = .075$
 $RMSEA = .052 [90\% CI = .046, .057]$

Note. Parameters for the Japanese group are in parentheses. All coefficients are significant at the .001 level.

Figure 2. The baseline model (MGCFA).

Table 2 provides results for measurement invariance testing. The chi-square difference between configural and metric models is significant, suggesting no perfect invariance of loadings across the two groups. The modification indices (MIs) reported with lavaan suggest setting free the loading of the item "share," which leads to a partial metric model with better fit indices. The chi-square test between configural and partial metric models is not significant, allowing for testing the invariance of items' intercepts and thresholds. The scalar model differs from the partial metric model, and MIs suggest releasing the thresholds of items "NPO page" and "news source: Web." The partial scalar model is not significantly different from the partial metric model according to the chi-square test. Measurement invariance across the two groups seems sufficiently high (Steinmetz, 2010) to evaluate their mean difference on latent constructs using structured means analysis, with the French group as the reference group (Dimitrov, 2006).

Table 2. Test of Measurement Invariance.

Model	χ^2	Df	$\Delta \chi^2$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR
1. Configural	638.88	252	/	.988	.985	.043 [.039, .047]	.061
2. Metric	826.73	307	26.09*	.983	.981	.045 [.042; .049]	.072
3. Metric partial	814.11	306	19.70	.984	.982	.045 [.041; .049]	.072
4. Scalar	857.32	317	72.46***	.983	.981	.046 [.042; .049]	.072
5. Scalar partial	821.44	313	11.70	.984	.982	.045 [.041; .048]	.071

Note. Configural: no invariance; Metric: factor loadings; Metric partial: factor loadings + free loading for "Share"; Scalar: factor loadings + item intercepts and thresholds; Scalar partial: factor loadings + item intercepts and thresholds + free thresholds for "Share," "NPO page," and "News source: Web."

Consistently with previous findings, structured means analysis shows that French respondents display higher means on each construct at the .001 level ($d_{\text{SNS use}} = 0.707$; $d_{\text{SNS for news}} = .535$; $d_{\text{Informational curation}} = .407$; $d_{\text{SNS political discussions}} = 2.342$).

Multiple Group SEM

Starting with the partial scalar model, regression paths are introduced, as well as covariates.⁶ This baseline model, where all regression paths are freely estimated, displays reasonable fit measures ($\chi^2(595) = 1852.16$, $CFI = .969$, $TLI = .963$, $RMSEA = .051$ [90% $CI = .048, 0.053$], $SRMR = .071$). We observe a significant drop in fit indices when all regression paths are set to be equal across groups ($\chi^2(602) = 2050.80$, $\Delta\chi^2 = 101.88$ ($p < .001$), $CFI = .964$, $TLI = .958$, $RMSEA = .054$ [90% $CI = .052, .057$], $SRMR = .073$), suggesting a more extensive analysis to detect structural invariance. The MIs suggest releasing paths a_1 , a_2 , b_3 , and c . This partially constrained model is well-fitted and not significantly different from the baseline model ($\chi^2(598) = 1865.41$, $\Delta\chi^2 = 4.47$ ($p = .215$), $CFI = .969$, $TLI = .963$, $RMSEA = .051$ [90% $CI = .048, .053$], $SRMR = .071$).

The hypothesized effects are computed from this last model (Table 3). Hypothesis 1 is supported by findings since paths a_1 , b_1 , and c are positive and significant for each group. Using SNSs is associated with more news-seeking attitudes, and each of these variables increases the frequency of political discussions on SNSs. For each sample, the mediation effect of *SNS for news* is partial: The largest part of the total effect of *SNS use* on *SNS political discussions* is not related to news-seeking attitudes.

The strength of this mediation differs across groups. From Table 3, we can estimate it represents 18% of the total effect for the French group and 36% for the Japanese group. While the effect of *SNSs for news* on *SNS political discussions* is similar for both groups, for Japanese respondents, regression coefficients for path a_1 , and even more for path c , are significantly weaker. These results support Hypothesis 4, which predicted that the direct effect of *SNS use* on *SNS political discussions* would be weaker for Japanese respondents. They also confirm findings made by previous studies about the lower tendency of Japanese users to seek political content on SNSs. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that discussing politics on SNSs is more dependent on news-seeking attitudes for the Japanese group. Thus, Hypothesis 5 is rejected.

⁶ The correlation matrix of latent variables and covariates can be found in the Appendix.

Following news providers does not lead to discussing politics for French or Japanese respondents, making the mediating effect of *informational curation* not significant for each group. This result suggests that SNS users of the two groups, including news seekers, find political discussants more among their friend networks than on pages of avowed news providers. Thus, Hypotheses 2 and 6 are rejected. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that paths b_2 and b_3 differ across samples. The (direct) effect of *SNS use* on *informational curation* is significantly higher for French respondents, while the effect of *SNS for news* on *informational curation* is significantly higher for Japanese respondents. The first difference might denote a prevalence of news finds me attitudes in the French group—that is, users who do not actively seek news on SNSs but rely on news providers' pages to stay informed. The second difference can be explained because political discussions on SNSs are scarcer in Japanese social media, making news seekers rely more on news accounts than on network others.

Table 3. Decomposition of Hypothesized Effects from the Partially Constrained MGSEM.

Paths	Point Estimate	95% CI
SNS use → SNS news (a_1)	.92 (.46)	.64 to 1.20 (.32 to .59)
SNS use → Informational curation (a_2)	.56 (.13)	.32 to .79 (-.04 to .29)
SNS news → SNS political discussions (b_1)	.29 (.29)	.14 to .44 (.14 to .44)
Informational curation → SNS political discussions (b_2)	-.04 (-.04)	-.13 to .05 (-.13 to .05)
SNS news → Informational curation (b_3)	.53 (1.12)	.38 to .76 (.79 to 1.14)
SNS news mediating effect ($a_1 \times b_1$)	.27 (.13)	.11 to .43 (.06 to .21)
Informational curation mediating effect ($b_3 \times b_2$)	-.02 (-.04)	-.08 to .03 (-.15 to .06)
Total indirect effects ($a_1 \times b_1 + a_2 \times b_2 + a_1 \times b_3 \times b_2$)	.23 (.11)	.12 to .33 (.06 to .16)
SNS use → SNS political discussions (c)	1.24 (.25)	.93 to 1.55 (.16 to .33)
Interest in politics → SNS political discussions (m)	.09 (.09)	.01 to .17 (.01 to .17)

Note. $N = 1,640$. Path estimates are unstandardized coefficients. Effects are computed via bootstrapping with 5,000 samples and biased corrected confidence intervals. Coefficients and CIs for the Japanese group are in parentheses. Bold and italic characters represent invariant parameters.

The coefficient for *interest in politics* is positive, significant, and invariant across the two groups. SNS political discussions increase as users' interest in politics gets higher.

The interaction term between *interest in politics* and *SNS use* is finally introduced to test Hypotheses 3 and 7. This interaction effect is positive and significant for each group ($B_{\text{France}} = .65$, $SE = .04$,

$p < .001$; $B_{\text{Japan}} = .33$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$). Probing of the interaction shows that, across values of *interest in politics*,⁷ simple slopes of *SNS use* are positive, but the predictor effect is stronger as the value of the mediator increases (Figure 3). Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported. Conversely, according to these results, the moderating effect of *interest in politics* is stronger for French users than for Japanese users. Accordingly, Hypothesis 7 is not supported.

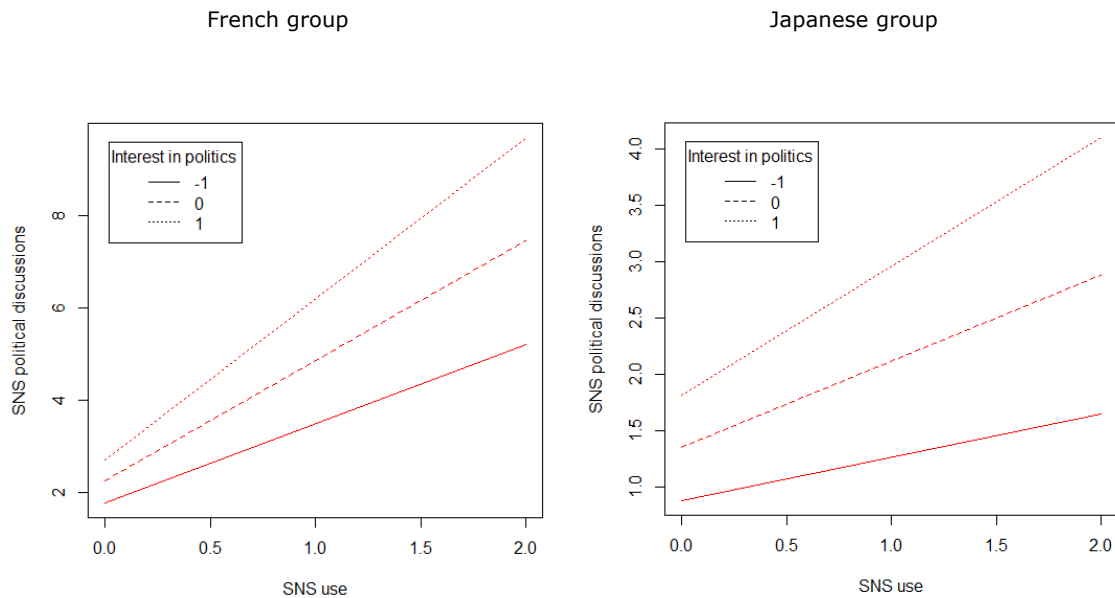


Figure 3. Simple slopes of SNS use depending on values of interest in politics.

Discussion

Previous works have suggested that SNS users are exposed to political content incidentally through messages posted by network friends, regardless of their interest in politics (Bode, 2016). Therefore, incidental exposures would reduce the gap between informed and non-informed citizens (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). In this article, I tried to put this idea to the test by identifying factors of political discussions on SNSs and comparing the impact of these factors across two groups of users from different national contexts.

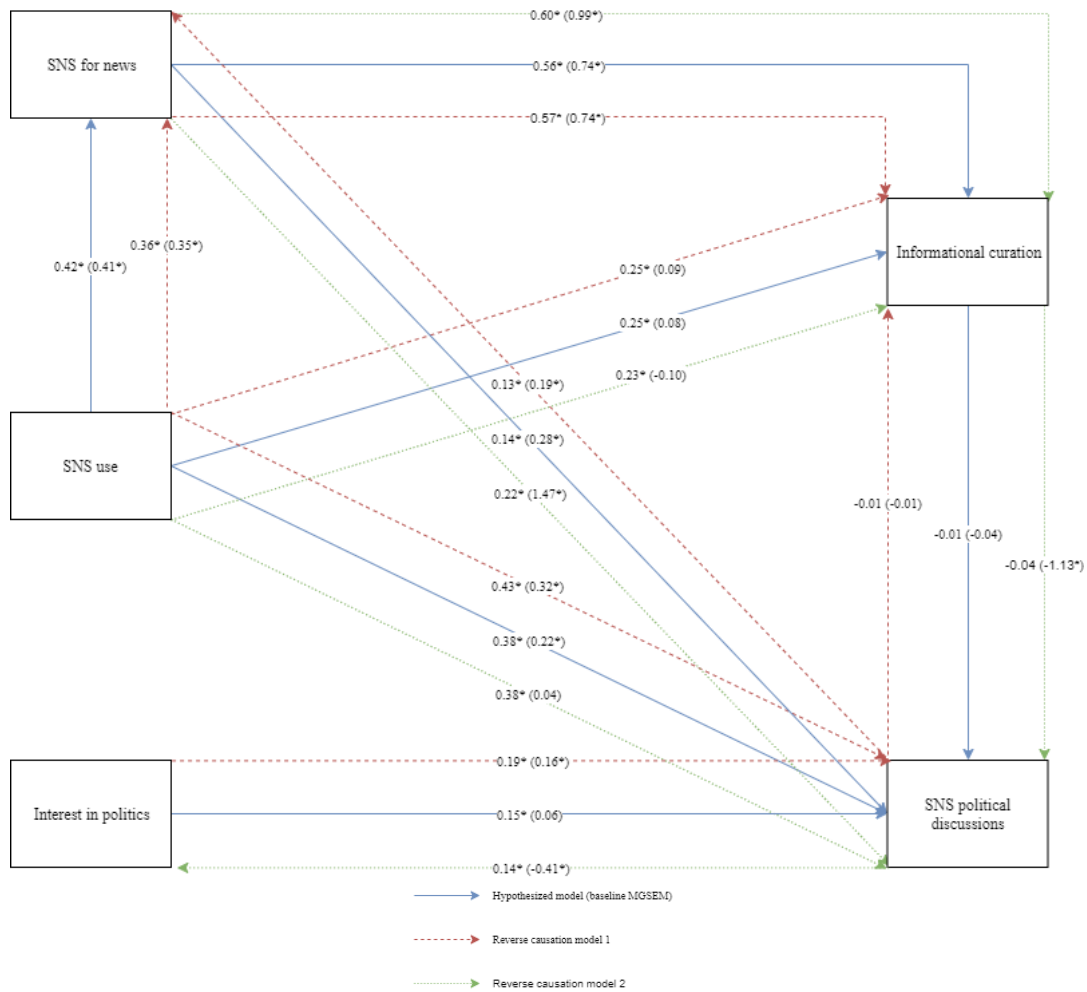
At the end of this study, I can highlight two major results. First, for the two groups studied in this article, discussing politics on SNSs is not wholly dependent on active news-seeking attitudes or personal news curation. Consistent with previous findings, this study acknowledges the importance of personal contact for spreading political information on SNSs (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). This result suggests that, like in offline settings (Walsh, 2004), people come across political content transmitted by online friends, sometimes unexpectedly. Does it mean that SNS political discussions are “happy incidents” (Kümpel, 2020,

⁷ Simple slopes estimated at 1 standard deviation below the mean of the moderator (−1), the mean of the moderator (0), and 1 standard deviation above the mean of the moderator (1).

p. 1084)? The results presented in this article show that they are not, because chances of finding political discussants on SNSs differ according to users' interest in politics. For each group, SNS use fosters more political discussions for interested users, even after accounting for active news seeking. This first result undermines the thesis of incidental exposures to political information on SNSs.

Second, the findings of this study show that (1) Japanese participants discuss politics on SNSs less than French ones, and that (2) discussing politics on SNSs is, for the members of the Japanese group, more dependent on intentional news seeking. As the results suggest, this is a consequence of the poorly politicized SNS environment among the Japanese group, where users are hardly interested in politics, do not actively seek news, and hardly discuss public issues. If the data do not provide a clear explanation for this result, it suggests that the theoretical framework assessed in this article does not adequately describe what happens on SNSs in different cultural settings. In addition, the study of the Japanese group draws attention to the significance of awareness of public issues in the whole SNS environment to understand, beyond users' interest in politics, the logic of political discussion on social media. The present study encourages future works to address the relationship between national context and the spread of political information on social media.

To what extent are the results presented in this study reliable? Because this study is based on cross-sectional data, we cannot confirm that the observed correlations imply causal mechanisms. However, to answer this question, I compared the baseline MGSEM with two competing reverse causation models (Figure 4). In the first one, *SNS political discussions* turn to a moderator and causes *SNS for news* and *informational curation*. In the second, *SNS use* and *SNS for news* are predictors of *SNS political discussions*, which have a causal effect on *interest in politics*. Each model displays good fit indices. The first reverse model shows that *SNS political discussions* have a positive although limited effect on *SNS use for news* in both groups. This indicates an asymmetrical reciprocal causation between these two variables. The second alternative model confirms the weight of news-seeking attitudes on *SNS political discussions* for the Japanese group: When *SNS for news* does not moderate the relationship between *SNS use* and *SNS political discussions*, the latter becomes not significant. Additionally, while discussing politics on SNSs positively affects users' interest in politics for the French group, this relationship is negative for the Japanese group. While it alleviates the findings concerning the French sample provided by the baseline model, suggesting that discussing politics on SNSs fosters users' interest in politics, this result also questions the consequences of SNS activities for citizens' engagement in Japan.



Baseline model	Reverse causation 1	Reverse causation 2
$\chi^2 (595) = 1852.16;$	$\chi^2 (595) = 1857.86;$	$\chi^2 (595) = 1698.96;$
$CFI = .969; TLI = .963; SRMR = .071$	$CFI = .969; TLI = .963; SRMR = .071$	$CFI = .973; TLI = .968; SRMR = .069$
$RMSEA = .051 [90\% CI = .048, .053]$	$RMSEA = .051 [90\% CI = .048, .054]$	$RMSEA = .048 [90\% CI = .045, .050]$

Note. * = coefficient significant at the .05 level. Coefficients for the Japanese group are in parentheses.

Figure 4. Reverse causation models (MGSEM).

This study has other limitations. I have restricted the analysis of SNS political discussions to Facebook and Twitter. As noted above, citizens, especially in Japan, also use other SNSs, instant messaging, and media services. In the same vein, Facebook and Twitter are very different platforms, and several authors

categorize Twitter as a microblogging platform more than as an SNS. Also, previous works have shown that political content circulates differently on the two platforms (Valenzuela, Correa, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). An additional step for future research would be to compare how news and political information spread within and across different websites.

Despite these limitations, this article brings relevant, although modest, insights for communication studies. The results presented in this article are incentives to consider users' motives and national context more systematically when assessing the communication of political content on social media. From this perspective, this article brings new evidence about the complexity of the mechanisms that foster exposure to political information in online settings.

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Appendix

Appendix Table. Zero-Order Correlations Between Variables Used in the Study.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Age	–										
2. Gender	.08 (0.33)	–									
3. Education	–.16 (–.06)	.09 (–.02)	–								
4. Income	–.08 (.01)	.18 (.07)	.35 (.22)	–							
5. Interest in politics	–.08 (.13)	.17 (.19)	.29 (.12)	.24 (.14)	–						
6. Type of SNS	–.21 (–.27)	.10 (–.12)	.10 (–.02)	.06 (–.10)	.22 (–.03)	–					
7. SNS networks' size	–.36 (–.23)	–.03 (–.03)	.17 (.02)	.08 (–.05)	.30 (.15)	.28 (.19)	–				
8. SNS use	–.30 (–.05)	.03 (.04)	.18 (.01)	.19 (.06)	.37 (.21)	.20 (.12)	.56 (.54)	–			
9. SNS for news	–.18 (–.02)	.08 (.04)	.26 (.09)	.20 (.13)	.45 (.38)	.22 (.12)	.37 (.33)	.36 (.36)	–		
10. Informational curation	–.26 (–.07)	.03 (–.04)	.25 (.08)	.17 (.07)	.38 (.21)	.16 (.22)	.41 (.34)	.43 (.33)	.51 (.49)	–	
11. SNS political discussions	–.16 (–.03)	.07 (0.05)	.16 (0.06)	.18 (.12)	.33 (.22)	.08 (0.04)	.29 (.20)	.47 (.31)	.36 (.36)	.31 (.28)	–

Note. All cell entries are two-tailed zero-order Pearson correlations, except for Gender and Type of SNS (Phi). SNS use, SNS for news, informational curation, and SNS political discussions are the extracted scores of latent variables. Coefficients for the Japanese group are in parentheses. $N = 1640$. Bold coefficients are significant at the .05 level.