Expressive Versus Consumptive Blog Use:
Implications for Interpersonal Discussion and Political Participation

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Research has established the positive relationship between news consumption, interpersonal discussion, and political participation. New insights within this framework have tested the positive effect of blog use in the political domain. Based on national survey data, this study proposes novel advances by distinguishing between a less involved blog use (consumptive), such as reading entries and comments, and a more active blog use (expressive), such as posting comments on other people's blogs and on one's own blog. Results indicate expressive blog use is directly related to political participation, online and offline, and interpersonal reasoning processes, including reasoning and disagreement, whereas consumptive blog use is not. Furthermore, the relationship between expressive blog use and participation is mediated by exposure to weak ties.

Keywords: Blogs, political participation, discussion networks, active versus inactive media use, expressive versus consumptive blog use

An increasing number of U.S. citizens rely on the Internet as means for gaining and sharing information, and online media use now plays a central role in political participation processes (Rainie &

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Horrigan, 2007). Not all observers find this to be a positive development (e.g., Hindman, 2009; Sunstein, 2001), but most research suggests that online media use is nonetheless generally supportive of participative visions of democracy, promoting various forms of political and civic engagement, including campaign activities (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005), online discussion (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005), and political participation more generally (Eveland & Dylko, 2007).

Among the more mobilizing uses of the Internet, blog use has emerged as a leading force (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010), adding to other types of online and offline informational activities in explicating political participation. Data from comScore Media Metrix, for instance, shows that the number of unique users of blogs and other social media has reached over 200 million in the United States (Technorati.com, 2012). The large number of users signals the potential role blogs may play as a major informational source and interpersonal discussion platform, carrying on their political meaning and influence.

Studies about the antecedents and consequences of blog use have mainly focused on ideological political blog use (e.g., Brundidge et al., in press), blog use motivations, reliance on blogs for information, and the demographics of blog users and their blog consumption (Eveland & Dylko, 2007; Johnson & Kaye, 2004). However, few studies have examined the impact of blog use more generally (ideological or otherwise) on political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Papacharissi, 2009); only initial efforts have tested whether visiting blogs helps to foster participation (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005). What is especially missing is an examination of the communicative processes involved in the link between blog use and political participation.

After over a decade of diffusion and evolvement, blogs have become one of the major information sources while also catalyzing interpersonal connections and discussion among citizens like few other media can. And even though blogs are authored by journalists and nonjournalists alike, thus blurring the lines between producers and consumers, they are no longer situated outside of news media and are considered vital in journalism (Lowrey, 2006). Due in part to their increased acceptance as a form of journalism, there has been a proliferation of blogs, catering to almost every personal interest, including public affairs, but also lifestyle concerns (e.g., Bennett, 2012), which may frequently be "para-political" (Dahlgren, 2005) in nature. Indeed, blog use may no longer be observed as a homogeneous process but as a heterogeneous one, through which a diverse array of citizens obtain information, reflect on it, and discuss it with others. The exploration of distinct uses is necessary to catch the nuanced relationship between the type and level of engagement of blog use and the possible implications for political participatory behaviors.

Therefore, the current study distinguishes between consumptive and expressive blog use and examines their relationships to online and offline political participation. In a recent study, Gil de Zúñiga (2009) theorized a passive-active blog use distinction. The study revealed that more active uses of blogs increased the likelihood that people would vote. Building on this prior study, we operationalize *less active* uses as *consumptive*. Consumptive use involves the relatively passive experience of reading blogs, which, although an important part of the process, may not be enough to stimulate the active processes involved in political participation. Expressive use is more active and interactive, which can engage people in a more

dialogical dynamic—potentially one that elicits more complex reasoning processes, which have been shown to spur citizens' political involvement (Eveland, 2004; Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011). Whereas each of these forms of blog use—expressive and consumptive—obviously falls on a continuum of experience, we find it useful to distinguish between them to isolate their respective influences on participation.

With the current study, we employ U.S. nationally representative data to build upon extant theory and research in a number of ways. First, we advance the theoretical distinction of consumptive and expressive blog use. Second, we advance the understanding of the relationship between expressive blog use and discussion attributes. Finally, we offer a model to test direct and indirect effects of blog use, *as a communicative process*, on participation.

Literature Review
Media Use and Political Participation

The link between news media use and political participation has been well established in research (e.g., McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). News about public affairs provides an important informational basis for political learning and collective action (e.g., Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006). However, these benefits tend to accrue most to people who are highly involved and invested in public affairs content. Within the tradition of selective exposure, for instance, research shows that audiences opt to encounter and attend to information on issues they consider most important personally or from favored sources (Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008).

It is not different with online news media, including blogs; scholars have found that online news sources also have a positive effect on participation (e.g., Brundidge et al., in press; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2010; Papacharissi, 2002; Shah et al., 2005), and it has been argued that the Web has opened space for political reengagement presenting a potentially more equalitarian "digital democracy" (Kobayashi, Ikeda, & Miyata, 2006; see also Kahn & Kellner, 2004). In this sense, online media supplement rather than replace offline media (Shah et al., 2005), and given the growth over the last decade of the Internet in terms of content and users, a growing number of adults are embracing online technology to engage in public life and public affairs (Green & Coffey, 2006; see also Brundidge, 2010b).

Past studies have stressed the increasing role of the Internet as a vehicle for political messages (e.g., Jankowski & van Selm, 2008; Shah et al., 2005) as people can engage in the political process via the online world (Gibson, Nixon, & Ward, 2003). New platforms such as blogs and user-generated websites have expanded the options for expression and discussion while offering different degrees of involvement. However, for the most part, research has paid attention to the undifferentiated visiting of blogs and its impact on levels of political engagement—showing a positive effect—but without discerning between expressive and consumptive blog use.

While consumptive and expressive media use often may go hand in hand, purely consumptive uses of blogs is, in effect, a contemporary form of selective exposure or attention. People who only read

blogs may not be as personally involved or invested in information as bloggers or those who post comments in others' blogs. Indeed, beyond the consumption of information, commenting and exchanging ideas may elicit deeper intrapersonal reflection and reasoning processes (Cho et al., 2009), and there is evidence that expressive online communication is more engaging (McMillan & Hwang, 2002). Consumptive and expressive uses of blogs may thus have varied consequences for people's level of engagement with democratic processes (i.e., discussing political affairs, thinking about and reflecting on the information they encounter, and participating in politics).

Interactivity

Active audience theory argues that in the mass media environment, audience members can actively interpret all kinds of media content they consume rather than just passively receive what the mass media feed (Fiske, 1989). This theory has helped scholarship to move theory beyond the classic Frankfurt School assumption that people stood little chance in resisting the constant and all-encompassing onslaught of mass culture (e.g., Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1987). However, the active audience theory is based on a mainly one-way model of communication. Traditional media do not allow audience members to interact with or respond to content providers and the content itself directly, which in the mass audience era, may have limited how active mass audiences could actually be. The contemporary environment, while far from untouched by strategic logic (see Habermas, 1984) and corporate onlookers (e.g., Crawford, 2009), at least provides opportunities for interacting with and acting on media. As Jenkins (2006) argues, the current media environment is defined by convergence and creative reworkings that allow audiences to archive, annotate, appropriate, transform, and recirculate media content—as well as create their own.

Further, the interactive features of digital media—such as real-time conversation, engaging, and no delay in message delivery (McMillan and Hwang 2002)—transform the traditional power dynamics in the relationship between information provider and receiver. With interactivity at the center of online media consumption, new media use changes the informational and interpersonal discussion dynamics, which have great potential in the online and offline democratic process (Graber et al. 2004), and provides expressive participatory options that traditional media use cannot easily achieve (Castells, 2007). Research also shows that online settings increase the sharing of information through recurring discussions (Kobayashi et al., 2006); given that blogs commonly link to all kinds of websites and online documents, blogging is in itself a conversation and exchange of information sources, satisfying both informational and expressive needs.

This article focuses on involvement with blog content because involvement and interactivity, both objective and perceived, are highly correlated (Song & Bucy, 2007). In addition to the lowered cost of access, no time-space limitations, and increasingly user-friendly interface, online expressive participation can facilitate exposure to heterogeneous networks, which provide useful and diverse information (Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2012), and may have increasing power on interpersonal discussions, especially the impact of active users in contrast to more inactive or consumptive ones. People exposed to highly interactive Web features and conditions have more political information efficacy and are more likely to vote than those exposed to lower interactive conditions (Tedesco, 2007).

Discussion Attributes: Reasoning, Weak Ties, and Disagreement

Interactivity is central to Internet communication, but the Web, and blogs in particular, have other features that also could favor and enable political participation. For one, the Internet is an appealing discursive medium, because online communication is both active and engaging (McMillan & Hwang, 2002). Likewise, the Internet is an arena that promotes reciprocity and thus further sharing of information and arguments through recurring discussions (Kobayashi et al., 2006). This kind of involvement lends itself to a greater number of interpersonal discussions and reasoning efforts, and research has shown the importance of this kind of thought processing when it comes to public affairs (Cho et al., 2009; Mutz, 2006), such as discussing with people who back up their arguments with evidence and who propose alternatives for problem solving.

Several studies have begun to explain how sharing and commenting on online news contributes to behaviors leading to political participation, whether online or offline (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2005), likely based on the notion that the discussion spurred from it mediates the effects of media use on political participation (McLeod et al., 1999). More important for the present study is the notion that active use—such as seeking, sharing, and commenting on information online—is more engaging cognitively than traditional media use (Wise, Bolls, & Shaefer, 2008) and aids comprehension and learning (Eveland & Dunwoody, 2002). Thus, posting and exchanging messages through blogs also may reflect on these findings more so than just reading them. Interactivity also may help to compensate for some of the deficits associated with online news, including selective exposure to only those news stories that are personally relevant (Gil de Zúñiga, Correa, & Valenzuela, 2012). Although "listening" is essential to processing information and to developing a sense of intimacy with the online environment (Couldry, 2006; Crawford, 2009), additional expressive uses of blogs may translate more readily into actual political participation by helping people to more deeply understand the political implications of their "personalized" (Sunstein, 2001) interests. Further, these activities should also translate into action in the political realm through the effect of different discussion attributes, which mediate the effect of information on participation (McLeod et al., 1999; Valenzuela et al., 2012).

In particular, expressive uses of blogs should lead to the formation of larger networks, which, in turn, may provide access to novel resources and information that are not available in users' immediate circle (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). Indeed, by virtue of their outward focus, people who express themselves online are likely to be the "gregarious" opinion leaders within their social networks, and opinion leadership has been linked to the formation of larger and more heterogeneous social networks (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Recent research has expanded on the importance of heterogeneous networks, which include "weak ties," and found that the nature and form of personal networks has an impact on economic and social values (Granovetter, 2005). The importance of networks of weak ties is that they yield more diversity of thought than stronger, familiar ties, thereby exposing those linked "weakly" to new ideas. This is the foundation of the "strength of weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973). Building on this work, the online context is more strongly associated with weak-tie communication. The Internet is not geographically bound, which may facilitate contacts with strangers, or weak ties.

As a result, online networks entail greater exposure to weak ties, offering enhanced opportunities for diversity and new ideas that may be central to spur further political involvement (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). This possibility is supported by research in the area of interpersonal communication, which suggests that exposure to interpersonal disagreement and diverse political perspectives may stimulate political participation (e.g., McLeod et al., 1999; Nir, 2005) by highlighting opportunities for involvement and fostering political learning (de Vreese, 2007). Although some research has found that exposure to crosscutting political perspectives actually reduces political participation due to increased experiences of ambivalence and interpersonal cross-pressures (e.g., Mutz, 2006), Nir (2005, 2011) helpfully points out that it is important to be specific about what is meant by political disagreement and found that it is political *opposition* in network composition (relative to the ego position), *and not competition,* that decreases political participation (also see Eveland & Hively, 2009).

Similarly, online exchanges can facilitate exposure to dissimilar views not present in one's immediate circle, as people are likely to be involved in heterogeneous groups online, which increases their chances to confront a wide array of information from many different perspectives (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). It has been argued that the Internet promotes deliberative exchange of ideas (Papacharissi, 2002) and research has found that politics enters into online exchanges in forums of discussion not explicitly dedicated to politics, making the Internet a particularly suitable place to encourage different viewpoints (Brundidge, 2010a, 2010b; but see Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

Research supports the notion that interpersonal discussions are mediating and/or moderating variables that trigger political activities—in particular, those exchanges with people who are geographically distant. Moreover, the expressive potential of the Internet allows people to participate online and increase both their information-seeking and discussion activities, resulting in new opportunities to become engaged (e.g., Shah et al., 2005; Xenos & Moy, 2007).

This has consequences in the political arena. Traditionally, political participation has been understood in electoral terms—mainly voting—but more recent definitions have expanded the term to include all kinds of activities done by citizens with the direct goal of influencing political outcomes such as writing to politicians, attending political rallies, or being involved in political action groups (e.g., Brady 1999).

These activities have traditionally been measured in offline settings, but there are also degrees of involvement in online activities with the same political goals. Thus, people can contribute money online, contact candidates via e-mail, sign online petitions, and sign up to volunteer for political campaigns (Shah et al., 2005). Expressive uses of the Web have been shown to enable political participation, yet it is unclear how far this finding extends—to which forms of expressiveness and on which platforms. Although political blog posts and commentary may not be "true political deliberation" (Habermas, 1989), they are still likely to be politically mobilizing due to their ability to promote the deeper processing of information and to alert individuals to the political implications of their particular interests. We therefore posit the following hypotheses.

H1:   *Expressive blog use will be positively related to offline and online political participation.*

H2:   *Expressive blog use will be positively related to central interpersonal discussion attributes such as reasoning, connection to weak ties, and exposure to higher levels of disagreement.*

Testing the Communication Mediation Model

Although the link between traditional news media use and political participation has been well established, the paths to democratic political engagement are varied. The communication mediation model, as presented by McLeod and his colleagues (1999) stresses that communication practices can have *direct* effects on political participation activities, but also *indirect* effects via political knowledge, political efficacy, and interpersonal discussions, which in turn favor political behaviors. More recently, academics have extended the communication mediation model based on an O-S-R-O-R model of communication effects by adding a step called a "reasoning" process (R) between stimulus (S) and second orientations (second O) (for full theoretical elaboration, see Cho et al., 2009; Jung et al., 2011). The reasoning process, in this model, refers to mental elaboration and collective consideration of the topic of concern (Cho et al., 2009; Jung et al., 2011). The inclusion of reasoning in the model may be important to understanding the mechanism that ties active blog use—where users express their opinions and engage in discussion with others—with political participation via a more reasoned interpersonal discussion.

However, since we are examining online expression and not the possibly more involved discussions that take place in face-to-face contexts, it is unclear how directly applicable the O-S-R-O-R model might map onto the link between blog use and participation. Still, we suspect similar processes may be at work. Like the offline environment, the impact of blog use seems likely to be mediated by interpersonal processes—namely, weak ties, reasoning level, and exposure to disagreement—though it is unclear which features of communication are most central in the blog use context. Therefore, drawing form an O-S-R-O-R communication model (Jung et al., 2011), the following research question is posed:

RQ 1:   *How do expressive blog use and consumptive blog use relate to each other, to people's discussion network attributes, and to political participation as a democratic process model?*

Methods
Data

This study uses national survey data collected in 2009–2010 among U.S. adults. The data are based on an online panel provided by the Center for Communication Research at the University of Texas at Austin. In an effort to overcome the potential shortcomings in previous research regarding generalizability with this type of data gathering, the sample was matched to key demographic variables (gender and age) of the U.S. census. After matching a 10,000 random draw to these demographic characteristics, a total of 1,432 e-mail addresses were found to be invalid. Of the remaining 8,568 participants, 1,159 responded on all items, and 323 had missing values for some of the variables of interest in the analysis. Accordingly, based on the American Association of Public Opinion Research's (AAPOR) RR3 calculation, the response rate was 22.8% (AAPOR, 2008, pp. 34–35). This relatively low

response rate falls within the acceptable range for panel Web-based surveys (Göritz, Reinhold, & Batinic, 2002). Compared to U.S. census data, our overall sample had more females and was better educated. Nevertheless, the demographic breakdown and voting behavior of the sample was similar to that of surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center and other organizations that employ random digit dialing (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2009), which seems to lend support to how well our sample statistics estimate U.S. population parameters (to learn more about the data, see Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013). The study focused on blog users, and therefore analyses are based in a subsample of these users (N = 282).

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Measures
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Control Variables

The study uses the five standard demographic control variables: *gender* (33% male; 67% female); *race/ethnicity* (84.5% White, 4.8% Black, 3.5% Hispanic, 3.1% Asian, and 3.2% other; eventually White was the reference group); *education* level (measured with a 5-point scale: less than high school, high school, some college, college degree, postgraduate degree (median group: college degree; M = 3.60, SD = 0.98); *income*, measured on a 10-point scale (median group: $50,000–$59,999; M = 5.54, SD = 3.12); and *age*, measured with a 6-group scale (median group: 40–49 years old).

Strength of partisanship was included by asking respondents to rate their party identification using an 11-point scale ranging from strong Republican (8.7% of respondents) to strong Democrat (13.2% of respondents), with the midpoint being Independent (29.1% of respondents). This item was folded into a 6-point scale, ranging from weak partisanship to strong partisanship (M = 3.31, SD = 1.79).

Another key control, *political efficacy,* was measured with two items that asked respondents to rate on a 10-point scale their agreement with the following statements: "Sometimes politics seems so complicated that a person like me cannot really change what is going on" and "People like me can influence government." The first item was reverse-coded so that a higher number indicated a greater perception of political competence. Both items were combined into an additive index (r = .22, range = 2 to 20, M = 10.49, SD = 4.15).

The *size of people's network* was also controlled for. Subjects had to provide an estimate of the number of people they "talked to face-to-face or over the phone about politics or public affairs" and the people they "talked to via the Internet, including e-mail, chat rooms, and social networking sites about politics or public affairs" during the past month. The question was open-ended, so responses over 21 had to be recoded into a single category to reduce skewness. An index of these two items was created ranging from 0 to 21 (M = 5.6, SD = 6.2).

Finally, we also controlled for people's level of news use to isolate the effects of our variables of interest on participation. Thus, a *news use* index was computed based on eight items asking respondents to rate on a 7-point scale how often they used the following media to get information about current events and public issues: network TV news, cable TV news, local TV news, radio news, print newspapers, online newspapers, print news magazines and online news magazines. The items were reverse-coded, so that a

higher number indicated more news consumption, and combined into an additive index (α = .68, range = 1 to 49, *M* = 23.35, *SD* = 8.78).

Dependent Variables

Five dependent variables were created by this study: offline political participation, online political participation, discussion reasoning level, discussion with weak ties, and exposure to disagreement.

For o*ffline political participation,* respondents were asked whether, during the past 12 months, they had engaged in any of the following activities: "Attended a public hearing, town hall meeting, or city council meeting," "Called or sent a letter to an elected public official," "Spoken to a public official in person," "Posted a political sign, banner, button or bumper sticker," "Attended a political rally," "Participated in any demonstrations, protests, or marches," "Voted in the 2008 presidential election," "Written a letter to a news organization," "Participated in groups that took any local action for social or political reform," and "Been involved in public interest groups, political action groups, political clubs, or party committees." Responses to each statement were added into a single index (Cronbach's α = .82, range = 0 to 10, *M* = 2.89, *SD* = 2.35), with higher scores indicating higher offline political participation.

Online political participation was computed by an additive index of five items that tapped on a 10-point scale how often they used the Internet for the following activities: "Write to a politician," "Send a political message via e-mail," "Make a campaign contribution," "Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper," and "Sign up to volunteer for a campaign/issue." Items were added to create an index of online political participation (Cronbach's α = .85, range = 5 to 50, *M* = 13.03, *SD* = 10.11). The survey also inquired subjects to rate on a 10-point scale how often they talked about politics or public affairs, whether online or offline, with different groups of people.

A *weak-tie discussion* typology was measured by adding two items measured on a 10-point scale ("talked to strangers" and "talked to people outside their family who do not share ethnicity and socioeconomic status") into a single index (interitem correlation = .55, M = 5.24, *SD* = 4.6). *Discussion reasoning*, on the other hand, was the average of how often respondents discussed with "people who back up their arguments with evidence" and with "people who propose alternatives or policies for problem solving" (interitem correlation = .77, *M* = 3.76, *SD* = 2.45).

Last, *network disagreement* was computed using a 10-point scale. Respondents were asked the frequency with which they talked about public affairs with people who agreed and disagreed with them using two separate items. To compute the level of exposure to disagreement in the network, we relied on Nir's (2005) index, which calculates respondents' average frequency of discussion with agreeable and disagreeable partners corrected by the absolute difference in frequency of exposure to these two types of discussants. The computed variable ranged from –4.5 to +9, with higher scores indicating higher network disagreement (*M* = 3.98, *SD* = 2.70).

Independent variables. Two independent variables are proposed by this study. Both relate to blog use; however, one captures a less engaged involvement with this medium, while the other registers a

more active relationship with the blogosphere. Thus, the questionnaire first filtered respondents by asking whether they visit blogs (yes = 272; 23% of total sample). The *consumptive blog use* measure tapped on a 10-point scale how often respondents read others' blogs ($M = 7.69$, $SD = 2.26$). Conversely, *expressive blog use* comprised two 10-point scale items—"post comments on others' blogs" and "write or post comments on your own blog"—that were added into a single index (interitem correlation = .55, $M = 10.35$, $SD = 5.68$). See Table 1 for all variable descriptions.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for All Variables.

	Cronbach's alpha	Mean	Standard deviation
Control variables			
Gender (female)		0.67	0.47
Race (White)		0.84	0.36
Education		3.60	0.98
Income		5.54	3.12
Age		3.13	1.27
Strength of partisanship		3.31	1.79
Political efficacy		10.49	4.15
Size of people's network		5.6	6.2
News use	.68	23.35	8.78
Dependent variables			
Offline political participation	.82	2.89	2.35
Online political participation	.85	13.03	10.11
Weak-tie discussion		5.24	4.6
Discussion reasoning		3.76	2.45
Network disagreement		3.98	2.70
Independent variables			
Consumptive blog use		7.69	2.26
Expressive blog use		10.35	5.68

Results

To test the hypotheses posed in this study, zero-order and partial correlations were performed between the variables of interest to learn about their relationships. Furthermore, five hierarchical linear regressions were conducted to observe the relationships between consumptive and expressive blog use, political participation, and different discussion attributes while controlling for demographics and other key social orientations, such as discussion network size, strength of partisanship, political efficacy and news use. Finally, to answer the proposed research question, structural equation modeling analyses were performed to simultaneously observe the direct influence of expressive blog use on participation, and the indirect influence via interpersonal discussion processes and attributes.

Results from zero-order correlations denote a positive relationship between expressive use of blogs and participation offline ($r = .130$, $p < .05$) and online ($r = .408$, $p < .001$), whereas consumptive use of blogs had no statistical relationship with political participation. These results remained constant once controls were introduced via partial-order correlations ($r = .128$, $p < .05$ and $r = .337$, $p < .001$, respectively) (see Table 2). Therefore, once our model controlled for the effect of other variables that also may explain why people participate in politics, there is a positive association between posting comments in blogs and participating politically both online and offline.

**Table 2. Correlations Among Consumptive Blog Use, Expressive Blog Use,
Offline Political Participation, and Online Political Participation (N = 232).**

	Consumptive Blog Use	Expressive Blog Use	Offline Political Participation	Online Political Participation
Consumptive Blog Use	—	0.368**	0.036	0.034
Expressive Blog Use	0.377**	—	0.130*	.0408**
Offline Political Participation	0.048	0.186*	—	0.554**
Online Political Participation	0.004	0.389**	0.564**	—

Note. The top diagonal represents zero-order Pearson's *r*. The bottom diagonal shows partial Pearson's *r* controlling for the effect of demographic variables (age, gender, education, income, and race), discussion network size, strength of partisanship, news use (online and offline), and political efficacy. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Both hypotheses proposed in the study were supported. The different regression models explained $R^2 = 20.5\%$ of the total variance for offline political participation and about $R^2 = 38\%$ of variance for online political participation. The total variance (R^2) predicted for the other three dependent variables also fell within the same range: $R^2 = 28.6\%$ for discussion reasoning, $R^2 = 34.6\%$ for discussion with weak ties, and $R^2 = 25.4\%$ for network disagreement.

Expressive blog use was positively related to offline political participation ($\beta = .177$, $p < .01$) even while controlling for demographics (income, $\beta = .203$, $p < .01$) and other social orientations (discussion network size, $\beta = .155$, $p < .01$; political efficacy, $\beta = .207$, $p < .001$; and news use, $\beta = .149$, $p < .05$). On the contrary, consumptive blog use had no relationship to offline political participation. An expressive use of blogs was even more strongly related to online political participation ($\beta = .352$, $p <$

.001), while consumptive blog use remained unrelated. Among the controls introduced in this model, age (β = .120, *p* < .01), political efficacy (β = .292, *p* < .001) and news use (β = .267, *p* < .001) were statistically significant in explaining why citizens engage in online political activities (see Table 3).

***Table 3. Standardized Beta Coefficients for Consumptive Versus
Expressive Blog Use Predicting Political Participation (N = 282).***

	Offline political participation	Online political participation
Demographics		
Age	0.099	0.120*
Gender (female)	0.016	0.004
Education	0.109	0.068
Income	0.203**	−0.022
Race (White)	0.060	0 .053
R^2	5.0%	3.1%
Social orientations		
Discussion network size	0.155**	0.025
Strength of partisanship	0.115	0.089
News use	0.149*	0.267***
Political efficacy	0.207***	0.292***
R^2 change	12.8%	26.1 %
Blogs		
Consumptive use	−0.103#	−0.092#
Expressive use	0.177**	0.352***
R^2 change	2.6%	8.7 %
Total R^2	20.5%	37.9%

# *p* < .10. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

As a second set of hypotheses, this study proposed a positive relationship between expressive blog use and reasoned conversations, exposure to weak ties, and a larger degree of overall disagreement. While consumptive blog use did not yield any positive association with any of these discussion attributes, expressive blog use was related to people's level of engagement in reasoned discussions (β = .162, *p* < .001; for a total model variance of R^2 = 28.6%), connections with weak ties (β = .298, *p* < .01; for a total R^2 = 34.6%), and having networks with a higher degree of overall disagreement (β = .173, *p* < .01; for a total model variance of R^2 = 25.4%; see Table 4).

**Table 4. Standardized Beta Coefficients for Consumptive and
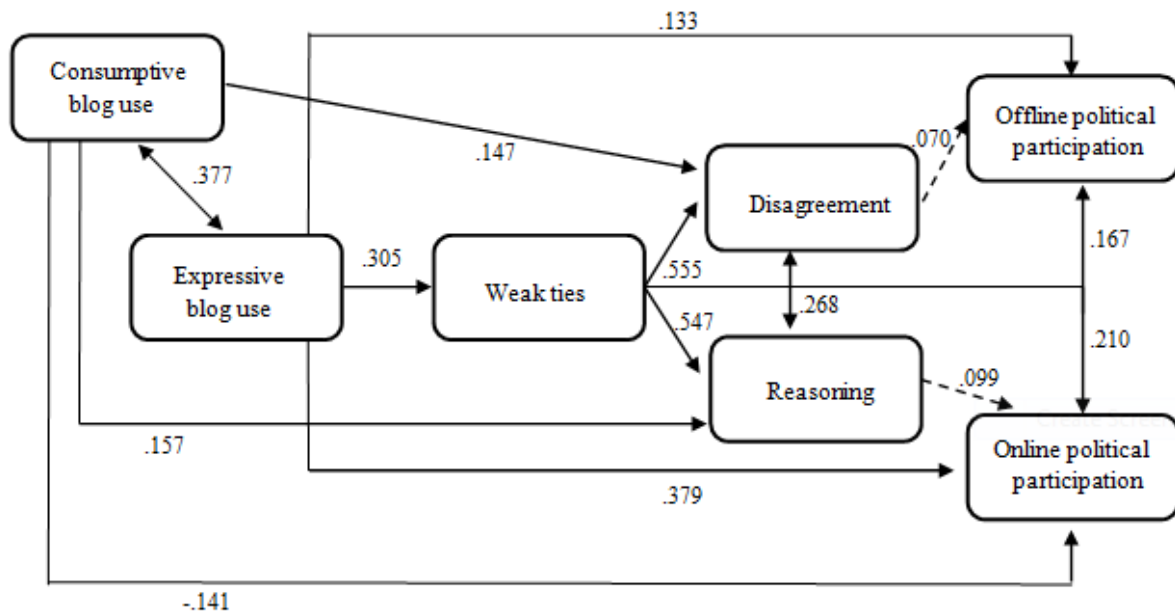Expressive Blog Use Predicting Discussion Attributes (N = 232).**

	Weak ties	Reasoning	Disagreement
Demographics			
Age	−0.027	−0.059	−0.079
Gender (female)	0.054	0.135*	0.051
Education	−0.051	0.057	−0.198***
Income	0.055	0 .042	0.042
Race (White)	−0.049	−0.024	−0.066
R^2	1.6%	2.6%	6.0%
Social orientations			
Discussion network size	0.115*	0.163**	0 .136*
Strength of partisanship	0.040	0.048	0.015
News use	0.332***	0.253***	0 .259**
Political efficacy	0 .211***	0.226***	0.109#
R^2 change	26.6%	22.5%	15.5%
Blogs			
Consumptive use	−0.064	0.080#	0.078#
Expressive use	0.298**	0.162***	0.173**
R^2 change	6.3%	3.5%	3.8%
Total R^2	34.65%	28.6%	25.4%

# $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Finally, this study posed a research question regarding the direct and indirect effects of expressive blog use on political participation via discussion reasoning and exposure to disagreement and weak ties (see Figure 1). Although many alternative models were tested, based on both our proposed theoretical foundation and best fit for the data, the presented model yield a very good fit for the data (χ^2 = 2.66; df = 4; p = .61; RMSEA = .0001, CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.018, SRMR = .009). Expressive blog use was directly related to both offline political participation (β = 0.133, $p < .001$) and online political participation (β = 0.379, $p < .001$). Additionally, in the context of the path model, expressive use of blogs leads people to interact with weak ties (β = 0.379, $p < .001$), which in turn leads to higher levels of political participation, both online and offline. Exposure to weak ties also, in turn, leads to higher levels of disagreement (β = 0.52, $p < .001$) and reasoning processes (β = 0.20, $p < .01$).

Reasoning and disagreement do not predict political participation in the present context. These paths lend support to the idea that the relationship between active blog use and participation is both direct and mediated, but they do not suggest that participation in this context relies on deep cognitive processing through disagreement and reasoning. In short, exposure to weak ties is the central mediating mechanism between expressive blog use and political participation, while reasoning and disagreement are nonsignificant as mediators. This suggests that weak ties must do something other than stimulate deep cognitive processing to promote political participation (i.e., provide useful information necessary to mobilize an individual).

Importantly, consumptive blog use has a direct and negative impact on individuals' online political engagement (β = −0.141, p < .001) and has no direct effect on offline political participatory behaviors. It does, however, contribute to political participation indirectly, through active blog use.

***Figure 1. Structural equation modeling showing direct and indirect effects of
expressive and consumptive blog use on discussion and political participation.***

Note. N = 232. Path entries are standardized SEM coefficients (Betas) at *p* < .05 or better for solid arrows. Dotted arrows denote non-significant relations at *p* < .10. The effects of *demographic* variables (age, gender, education, race, and income), *political antecedents* (political efficacy and strength of partisanship), *media use,* and *discussion network size* (online and offline) on endogenous and exogenous variables have been residualized. Model goodness of fit: χ² = 2.66; *df* = 4; *p* = .61; RMSEA = .0001, CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.018, SRMR = .009). Explained variance of criterion variables:

weak ties R^2 = 69.3%; disagreement R^2 = 34.9%; reasoning R^2 = 34.3%; offline political participation R^2 = 5.9%; political participation online R^2 = 20.9%.

Discussion

This study expands the current literature on blogs and political participation by contributing to the understanding of individuals' blog use nuances. The article proposes and operationalizes both an expressive use of blogs and a less active, consumptive one. In doing so, it provides insights about the impact of blog use on political life and opens new venues for analysis of digital media consumption and political participation.

Findings indicate that expressive blog use matters when it comes to understanding the connection between blog use and political participation. While previous studies have seen blog users as a homogeneous group and blog use as a homogeneous behavior, this study delves into the differences within the overall group of blog users and finds different effects by distinguishing what they do with the blogs—read them as consumers or write their own entries and comments as expressive users. In contrast to past studies showing how blog use as a whole impacts politics and in support of our hypotheses, our results reveal that only expressive blog use is a positive predictor of online and offline participation, while consumptive blog use does not make a significant difference and that an expressive use of blogs also lends itself to being exposed to particular discussion attributes, including weak ties, disagreement, and reasoning. Those who post comments on others' blogs and on their own blogs engage in interpersonal exchanges with people they may not interact with otherwise, exposing themselves to different points of view. In other words, online exchanges among expressive blog users seem to be particularly useful in promoting and benefiting from different viewpoints and argument elaboration. Consumptive blog use of blogs does not predict such relationships.

Second, our findings show that expressive blog use has both direct and indirect effects on political participation, expanding our understanding, though perhaps complicating the O-S-R-O-R model of communication effects (Cho et al., 2009; Jung et al., 2011). On the one hand, expressive blog use leads to more frequent conversations with strangers, or weak ties, which in turn predicts higher levels of reasoned conversations and exposure to greater levels of disagreement. On the other hand, reasoned conversations and exposure to disagreement do not predict political participation, which is what the O-S-R-O-R model would predict. Indeed, the relationship between expressive blog use is mediated by frequent conversations with strangers, or weak ties, and that alone. This suggests that weak ties in this context are mobilizing not for their contribution to deep cognitive processing. More likely, they contribute to people's exposure to novel information (Granovetter, 1973), alerting them to ways that they might participate politically. Indeed, one of the chief ways interpersonal discussion may contribute to political participation is by assisting citizens in reaching a decision about how they might participate (Lemert, 1981). This mechanism may not be as "enlightened" as intensive cognitive processing, but makes sense when considering the less interpersonally demanding context of blog expression relative to face-to-face deliberation (Gastil, 2000; Bachmann et al., 2012; see also Moy & Gastil, 2006).

The expressive use of blogs relates to participation, but in a way that is distinct from traditional political discussion and news use processes. This connection between expressive use and participation may be partially, though not entirely, explained through the lens of an O-S-R-O-R model (Cho et al., 2009; Jung et al., 2011)—although it may be slightly modified from its original emphasis on deep cognitive processing to reflect our findings in the context of blogs. Demographic variables and consumptive blog use pose the first set of orientations (first O); the more expressive use of blogs enhanced by features such as interactivity, hyperlinking, and the archived information create a new type of interpersonal discussion would represent the stimulus (S), which seems to lead people to maintain discussions with weak ties (R), alerting them to novel information about how they might translate their interests into participation (orientations or second O), which leads to greater levels of participation (final behavioral R).

The current study also reveals the changing patterns and long-term trends in online media consumption and its influence. Different media provide different features, which change people's media consumption behavior, as well as communication and participation practices (also see Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013). Studies have shown that people who read newspapers gain more political knowledge, but those who consume television news are not as politically informed. In the case of blogs, a more expressive use seems to be critical to moving beyond a consumer orientation and toward a citizen orientation. In this sense, blog consumption may be less like newspaper reading and more akin to the more passive experience of watching television—at least until people are moved to express themselves in the interactive online environment.

Moreover, given the increasing number of people embracing blogs as sources of information and platforms of expression, blog engagement, attention, and interactivity among blog users may change the way people communicate with each other as well as the options for political participation in the long run. In that sense, future studies could focus on the interaction between online participation and offline participation. Even though offline political participation remains the mainstream option for political goals and the focus of most studies regarding participation, the role of online political participation may become more important and influential in today's journalism and informational media landscape. A recent study, for instance, already suggests that online activism is a distinctive type of political participation (Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, 2012).

While this article makes some important advances, it does have a number of limitations. Perhaps one of the most important of these is the subsample size, which is smaller than is ideal. However, we suspect that a larger sample size would strengthen rather weaken our findings, and may provide more support for the original O-S-R-O-R model.

Also, our use of cross-sectional data prevents us from stating a causal order between blog use and political participation. People's participatory behaviors also may explain how they use the blogosphere to be informed and discuss politics. However, in this study, different competing structural equation models were tested, and the presented model produced the best fit to the data. Still, longitudinal data would provide a better answer for the causation quandary.

Finally, the measurement of consumptive blog use was less than ideal. While expressive blog uses includes two highly correlated items to generate a more reliable and valid instrument, our data allowed us to include only one item for the measurement of a more consumptive blog use, which represents an instrumental limitation. Although other authors have included single-item measurements in the context of blog use (e.g., Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung, & Perlmutter, 2010; Singer, 2008), we would have ideally liked to have had a more nuanced measure of consumption that might ask the respondent different strategies of consuming blog information (i.e., read posts, read others' comments, etc.) as well as capturing how often they do it and how much attention they pay to the content they read to better reflect the extent to which they spent time "listening" (Crawford, 2009) while consuming blog content. In fact, we strongly believe future research should pay more attention to this distinction, because consumptive versus expressive uses are clearly articulated in the blog environment but are more blurred in other environments, such as on Twitter, where it is more difficult to draw a distinction between consuming and producing.

Overall, this article contributes to the understanding of how more expressive blog use relates to people's political participation directly and through exposure to political discussion in the context of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Future research should continue to distinguish between features in blog use that do and do not lead people to become more involved in the political realm. Such scholarship is particularly relevant given the increasing number of people embracing new technologies not only to become informed but to express themselves and exchange ideas as the basic premise to a healthier democracy.

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