

Social Media News Consumption and Opinion Polarization on China's Trade Practices: Evidence From a U.S. National Survey

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Drawing on a national survey among American adults, this study focuses on the trade dispute between the U.S. and China and explores the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization about China's trade practices. The results reveal that the time spent on social media is indirectly associated with opinion polarization on China's trade practices through news consumption on social media. Furthermore, the mediating effect of social media news consumption is found to be particularly stronger among those who frequently encounter like-minded information related to the U.S. government's action during the trade dispute. Implications are discussed for the interaction between foreign policy and public opinion in the contemporary media environment.

Keywords: social media, selective exposure, foreign policy, U.S.–China relations, opinion polarization

Social media platforms have been blamed as the incubator of extreme opinions and like-minded echo chambers in this digital age (Sunstein, 2017). The ease of posting immediate responses on social media can facilitate the expression of unthoughtful and extreme opinion. As many as two-thirds of Americans (67%) receive their news on social media through their likes, following, and subscriptions, of which many share similar views with them (Bialik & Matsa, 2017). Through such repeated exposure to reinforcing information and arguments, their existing bias or prejudice can be reinforced (Dylko et al., 2018). The U.S.–China trade war since 2018, as the largest economic battle between the world's two super powers ("How

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the 'Biggest Trade War,'" 2018), provides fertile ground for this study to extend the literature by examining how social media can affect opinion polarization on a foreign country such as China's trade practices.

Previous studies have examined the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization on political parties and issues such as same-sex marriage and gun control (Beam, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2018; J. K. Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Nevertheless, some literature has suggested that the polarizing effects of social media may be different across issues and political contexts (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; F. L. Lee, 2016). The trade conflict between the U.S. and China can be considered a "hard issue" for most Americans, as the assessment of such international economic issues is technical and complicated (Carmines & Stimson, 1980; Johnston & Wronski, 2015). In this case, individuals are more likely to use partisan cues to interpret the trade conflict news they receive on social media (Wang & Shen, 2018). As a result, the increasing divergence between the two parties would extend to hard issues such as the trade dispute between the U.S. and China (Johnston, 2018). Indeed, a survey conducted amid the trade tensions ("Climate Change and Russia," 2019) indicated that 54% of Republicans say it is important to get tougher with China on economic issues, whereas only 19% of Democrats agree with this statement.

Given this background, this study investigates the association between social media use and opinion polarization on China's trade practices, testing the mediating role played by social media news consumption (e.g., reading news about the trade dispute). Furthermore, because social media facilitate people to seek out news content consistent with their preexisting views (Dylko et al., 2018; Vargo, Guo, McCombs, & Shaw, 2014), we also examine how exposure to like-minded information moderates the mediating effect of social media news consumption. The findings of this study provide a more nuanced understanding of the roles social media play in a democratic society. From the normative perspective, opinion polarization brings negative consequences to a democratic society, such as unproductive debates among policy makers, biased evaluation of new policies, and lack of tolerance toward disagreement (Fishkin, 1995; J. K. Lee et al., 2014).

Debate on Social Media Use and Opinion Polarization

Scholarly debate persists as to whether social media use polarizes or depolarizes people's opinions on political issues. A polarized opinion refers to an attitude toward an issue that leans toward either a favorable or unfavorable end on a continuum (Abelson, 1995). Given that social media's newsfeed algorithm is customized to users' information diet and preference, some scholars are concerned that citizens are enclosed in an echo chamber where they are predominantly exposed to like-minded information (Dylko et al., 2017; Sunstein, 2017). Also, people holding similar opinions tend to discuss political issues with each other and express strong and extreme opinions on social media (Chan & Fu, 2017). Nevertheless, such segregation of communication is quite issue dependent. Though it is prevalent in the social media discussions of presidential debates, the phenomenon is less profound in the public exchanges on other issues such as the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing (Barberá et al., 2015). Therefore, it is important to explore this question in the context of a diversity of issues, such as the trade conflict between China and the U.S. In addition to people's active tendency of approaching political agreement, some evidence suggests that social media algorithms favor proattitudinal news stories over other types of media content (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic,

2015). Hence, it is conceivable that social media use is likely to polarize people's opinions on the trade conflict by exposing them to like-minded information about the issue.

On the contrary, some previous literature indicates that social media use is negatively associated with political polarization (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2017; Holmes & McNeal, 2016). The mechanism underlying the depolarizing effect is through interpersonal discussion with networked friends who hold different opinions (Y. Kim, 2015; J. Lee & Choi, 2019). Individuals primarily use social media platforms for networking purposes, and the similarity of political views is rarely the most important criterion for choosing online connections (C. Kim & Lee, 2016). As a result, social media facilitate people from different cultures and backgrounds to converge and communicate diverse viewpoints with each other (Brundidge, 2010). Indeed, previous studies surveying Americans have shown that frequent social media use leads to a heterogeneous discussion network (Hampton, Lee, & Her, 2011; J. K. Lee et al., 2014). In this case, social media use has the potential of depolarizing people's opinions because discussion with a diversity of others will enhance mutual understanding and tolerance toward the other side (J. Lee & Choi, 2019; Mutz, 2006). For example, if a person holds an extremely negative opinion on China's trade practices, his or her opinion may become more moderate after social media conversation with those who benefit from trading with China.

Furthermore, some previous literature has found that social media use has no direct impact on opinion polarization (C. Lee, Shin, & Hong, 2018; J. K. Lee et al., 2014). This is because most people use social media for entertainment and networking purposes, rather than obtaining information about politics and public affairs (Hayes, Carr, & Wohn, 2016; C. Kim & Lee, 2016). When it comes to the trade conflict between U.S. and China, this prediction is even more likely, as most Americans do not care about international affairs, especially those not closely related to the U.S. national security (Peake, 2001). Given these competing theories and evidence, we propose the following research question:

RQ: How is social media use associated with opinion polarization on China's trade practices?

Roles of Social Media News Consumption and Like-Minded Information

Although the direction of the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization is unclear, the three predictions reviewed above suggest that news consumption on the platforms may play a critical role. Social media allow users to easily receive public affairs news by following news organizations and clicking on the news links shared by their networked friends (Shearer & Grieco, 2019). Indeed, social media are essentially a space for information exchanges, and thus frequent users have been found more involved in such news-related activities (Choi, 2016; Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012). Therefore, news consumption related to the trade conflict could play a mediating role in the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization.

For those who are interested in the trade conflict between the U.S. and China, social media facilitate them to engage with news from various sources (Sunstein, 2017). The selective exposure thesis suggests that they tend to seek out like-minded news to maintain cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1957; Stroud, 2008), which in turn leads to more polarized opinions (Lu & Lee, 2019b; Warner, 2018). Even if individuals accidentally come across some counterattitudinal information on social media, they may either ignore such

messages or critique them with counterarguments (Bail et al., 2018; Lu, 2019). The way counterattitudinal news is perceived and evaluated is often biased; that is, people tend to critically scrutinize dissonant perspectives (Ditto & Lopez, 1992). By repeatedly rehearsing counterarguments in mind, they are likely to believe the existing opinions more strongly (Y. Kim, 2019; Taber & Lodge, 2006). With the trade dispute increasingly covered by traditional media and President Trump's tweets, the issue becomes salient among the American public. Previous studies have found that social media news users are especially willing to engage in biased information processing when an issue becomes salient and they attach higher levels of personal importance to it (F. L. Lee, 2016; Leeper, 2014). For example, when individuals in favor of the tariffs imposed on Chinese goods come across some news about the advantages of free trade, they may counterargue with the information in mind by thinking of the possible benefits brought by the tariffs. In this case, even exposure to counterattitudinal news on social media is likely to polarize people's opinion on the trade conflict (Bail et al., 2018).

For those who are uninterested in the trade conflict, they usually hold moderate opinions (Prior, 2007). Nevertheless, because of the mechanism of incidental exposure, they may come across some trade conflict news shared by their networked friends on social media (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017; J. K. Lee & Kim, 2017). Though the disinterested citizens learn more about the issue via social media news, they are likely to form a stronger opinion (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). In sum, news consumption related to the trade conflict is likely to relay the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization. Indeed, some previous studies (e.g., C. Lee et al., 2018) have found that news consumption mediates the relationship between social media use and ideology polarization. Therefore, we extend this line of research by examining opinion polarization on international affairs and propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Social media news consumption mediates the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization on China's trade practices.

Though frequent social media users are likely to engage with news about the trade conflict, the relationship between news consumption and opinion polarization depends on how much of the information they encounter is consistent with their preexisting opinion on the U.S. government's action during the conflict. In other words, the indirect relationship through social media news consumption may be moderated by the frequency of exposure to like-minded information on social media. The more like-minded information a person encounters on social media, the more polarized his or her opinion will be (Dylko et al., 2018; Westerwick, Johnson, & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017). This is because exposure to like-minded information familiarizes social media users with reinforcing arguments (Gvirsman, 2014; Sunstein, 2017). People tend to consider the sources of like-minded information as credible and unbiased, so the awareness of such reinforcing arguments is particularly effective in polarizing opinions (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Stroud, Muddiman, & Lee, 2014). Also, frequent social media news users often use the platforms to monitor the online opinion climate (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). With more exposure to like-minded information, they are likely to perceive the public opinion as consonant with their own attitudes and thus become more confident and polarized (Baron et al., 1996; Tsfati & Chotiner, 2016).

When it comes to foreign policy issues such as the trade conflict, most Americans have fewer personal experiences and have to rely on news and political elites to form attitudes toward other countries (Zaller, 1994). In this case, social media facilitate politicians to address the issue directly to their like-minded followers (Hong & Kim, 2016). For example, President Trump has used simple rhetoric and straightforward posts to discuss foreign policy on Twitter, including his accusations of China's trade practices (Ross & Rivers, 2018). Previous studies have found that politicians' simple rhetoric is particularly persuasive among a like-minded audience (Amsalem, 2019). As proposed in the appraisal theories of emotion, exposure to like-minded information accusing the other party or opponents often induces negative emotions such as anger and fear (Keltner, Ellsworth, & Edwards, 1993; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Lu & Lee, 2019b). For instance, when the supporters of the U.S. government's actions encounter like-minded information via President Trump's tweets, they may feel angry with the Chinese government's violation of free trade principles. Such negative emotions are likely to polarize people's opinions (Lu & Lee, 2019b). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis of the moderating effect of like-minded information exposure on the indirect relationship among social media use, news consumption, and opinion polarization. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model tested in this article.

H2: Exposure to like-minded information about the trade conflict moderates the mediating effect of social media news consumption in the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization; specifically, the mediating effect of social media news consumption is stronger among individuals who encounter like-minded information frequently.

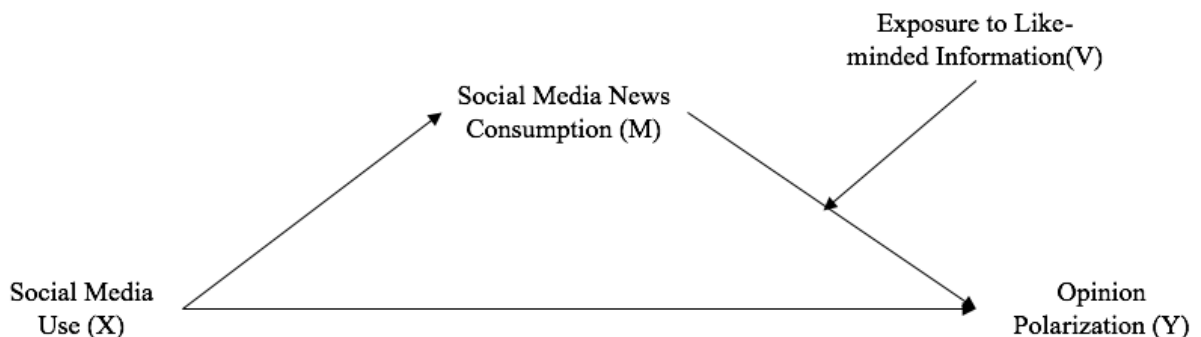


Figure 1. Conceptual model. Indirect association of social media use (X) with opinion polarization on China's trade practices (Y) through social media news consumption (M) that is conditioned by exposure to like-minded information on social media (V).

Method

This study employs an online national survey ($N = 1,046$) to test the research question and hypotheses. We decided to conduct an online survey to collect U.S. public opinion on the U.S.-China trade conflict rather than a telephone survey for two reasons. First, the response rate to a telephone survey is at an all-time low, between 5% and 10% by reputable poll companies ("Telephone Survey Response," 2018), with large nonresponse bias among the younger population. Second, telephone survey can only contain

simple questions with limited variables. After obtaining the approval from the authors' university Institutional Review Board, we conducted an online national survey based on an opt-in panel provided by Qualtrics. The sampling strategy in the panel followed the demographic breakdown of the U.S. Census data. The participants were compensated by Qualtrics following their typical reward scheme.

To ensure response quality of the sample, we implemented several procedures. First, we included an attention check question midway through the questionnaire asking the respondents to pick one specific answer. Those who failed the attention check question were excluded from the sample. In addition, respondents were reminded to complete all questions they should answer. Furthermore, all participants who responded in less than four minutes were excluded from the sample. The strict census demographic quota (by gender, age, and ethnicity) resulted in a diverse sample mirroring the general population. We also implemented education and income quota following national poll results such as Gallup and the Pew Internet. Detailed information about the sample breakdown can be found in the Appendix. Data were collected from February 3 to February 28, 2019, during which trade talks were held between China and the U.S. before the official deadline of the \$500 billion tariff implementation on March 1 (which was postponed eventually).

Measurement

Social media use was measured by asking respondents how much time they spent on a typical day using the following eight common social media platforms used by Americans: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Pinterest, Snapchat, and Reddit. Following the previous literature (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Lu & Lee, 2019a), answer choices range on a 6-point ordinal scale (0 = *not at all*, 5 = *more than 5 hours*). Next, the maximum value of the answers to these eight platforms was selected to measure social media use in further analyses ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.49$, range: 0–5). Doing this is consistent with the measurement of other key variables (i.e., social media news consumption, exposure to like-minded information; see below) that asked about each respondent's activities on the platform that he or she used most often. More than 80% of the respondents (82.8%) chose Facebook or YouTube as the social media site that they spent most time on, suggesting the dominance of these two platforms among Americans ("Share of U.S. Adults," 2019).

Social media news consumption was measured by two items (5-point scale: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*), with respondents indicating how often they engage in the following activities on the social media platform that they use most frequently: (1) click on news links related to the trade conflict between U.S. and China; (2) get information about the trade conflict between U.S. and China (Beam et al., 2018; Lu & Lee, 2020). Each respondent's scores on these two questions were combined to represent the frequency of social media news consumption (Spearman–Brown coefficient = .86; $M = 1.59$, $SD = .74$, range: 0–4).

Exposure to like-minded information was determined by first asking respondents their opinion on the current U.S. government's action during the trade conflict with China (5-point scale; range: 1–5; 1 = *strongly oppose*, 2 = *oppose*, 3 = *neither support nor oppose*, 4 = *support*, 5 = *strongly support*). Then, respondents were asked to think of the social media platform they used most frequently and use a 5-point

scale (i.e., 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*) to indicate the frequency of encountering information that supports ($M = 1.07$, $SD = 1.08$, range: 0–4) and opposes ($M = 1.14$, $SD = 1.12$, range: 0–4) the U.S. government's action during the trade conflict with China. Finally, exposure to like-minded information ($M = 1.27$, $SD = 1.13$, range: 0–4) was created by linking a person's opinion with one of these two information-related questions. Specifically, for those people who answer "strongly support" or "support" to the question about the U.S. government's action, their frequency of exposure to like-minded information was determined by the question about supportive information; for those who answer "strongly oppose" or "oppose" to the question about the U.S. government's action, their frequency of exposure to like-minded information is determined by the question about opposing information. Those who have no opinion or answered "neither support nor oppose" ($N = 222$) were excluded from the analysis of the moderated mediation model because neither supportive information nor opposing information can be considered like-minded for them. Participants who were included in the analysis of the moderated mediation model tend to be more males, older, and have higher education and household income.

Opinion polarization was determined by first asking respondents about their opinion on the trade conflict. Two 5-point items (i.e., 0 = *strongly disagree*, 1 = *disagree*, 2 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 3 = *agree*, and 4 = *strongly agree*) were combined to measure how people think of China's trade practices ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.80$, range: 0–8, Spearman-Brown coefficient = .66): (1) China's trade practices are unethical; (2) U.S. has been taken advantage of by China. Because polarized attitudes are operationalized as those farther from neutrality, we followed the previous literature (J. K. Lee et al., 2014; Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011) by measuring opinion polarization with the folded value of each respondent's score on this 9-point scale. For example, if a person's opinion on China's trade practices is 7, then the folded polarization score is 3 ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 1.31$, range: 0–4).

Control variables include age ($M = 46.18$, $SD = 17.01$), gender (49.1% male), race (68.4% White), income ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.20$, range: 1–5), education ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.63$, Range = 1 to 9), Ideology ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.68$, range: 1–7, high score indicating more liberal), interest in trade conflict information ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.07$, range: 0–4), perceived knowledge about China ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.46$, range: 0–4), discuss with friends about the trade conflict ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 1.21$, range: 0–4), exposure to non-like-minded information ($M = 1.28$, $SD = 1.15$, range: 0–4), receive trade conflict news from TV (56.1%), receive trade conflict news from newspaper (19.8%), receive trade conflict news from radio (14.2%), receive trade conflict news from online websites (31.1%).

Results

A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the association between social media use and opinion polarization on China's trade practices. Some control variables were found to be significantly related to opinion polarization. Specifically, older people, males, conservatives, individuals who perceive themselves knowledgeable about China, and those who are interested in the trade conflict information tend to hold extreme views on China's trade practices. Findings are summarized in Model 1 in Table 1. In terms of the research question, the results indicate that social media use is not significantly associated with opinion polarization on China's trade practices, ($B = -.02$, $t = -.67$, $p = .50$), after controlling for the demographics and other variables.

Table 1. Regression Analysis of Opinion Polarization on China's Trade Practices, Unstandardized (SE).

Predictor	Opinion polarization		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	.01 (.003)*	.01 (.004)**	.01 (.004)*
Gender (male)	.36 (.10)***	.41 (.11)***	.25 (.15) ⁺
Education	.01 (.03)	.02 (.04)	-.01 (.05)
Income	.001 (.04)	.01 (.05)	-.10 (.06) ⁺
Race (White)	-.07 (.10)	-.02 (.11)	-.07 (.15)
Ideology	-.09 (.03)**	-.09 (.04)*	-.04 (.05)
Interest in trade conflict information	.23 (.05)***	.26 (.06)***	.21 (.08)**
Knowledge about China	-.07 (.04)*	-.02 (.04)	-.10 (.06) ⁺
Discuss trade conflict	.03 (.04)	-.004 (.05)	.03 (.06)
TV news	.02 (.09)	-.07 (.11)	-.04 (.15)
Newspaper news	-.17 (.11)	-.10 (.13)	-.24 (.15)
Radio news	.08 (.12)	.08 (.13)	.23 (.16)
Online news	.17 (.09) ⁺	.03 (.11)	-.13 (.14)
Social media use	-.02 (.03)	.01 (.05)	-.03 (.06)
Social media news (A)		.24 (.07)**	-.14 (.17)
Non-like-minded news			.08 (.08)
Like-minded news (B)			-.41 (.14)**
A * B			.20 (.07)*
R ²	.13	.14	.15

Note. Listwise, ⁺ $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The first hypothesis proposed that social media news consumption mediates the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization. We used the Model 4 template of Hayes's (2013) PROCESS Macro to test H1. We analyzed the 95% confidence intervals (CIs) associated with the indirect effects of social media news consumption, with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The results indicate that social media news consumption significantly mediates the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization ($B = .0189$, $SE = .0094$, $CI [.0051, .0424]$). Because the confidence interval does not cover zero, social media news consumption is a significant mediator. Thus, H1 is supported. Specifically, time spent on social media is positively associated with news consumption ($B = .08$, $t = 3.04$, $p < .01$), which, in turn, positively predicts opinion polarization on China's trade practices ($B = .24$, $t = 3.32$, $p < .001$).

The second hypothesis predicted that exposure to like-minded information about the trade conflict moderates the indirect effect of social media use on opinion polarization through news consumption. The hypothesis was tested with a regression model by using the Model 14 template of the PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2013). This model examines how the mediating relationship among variables "operate differently for different people or in different contexts or circumstances" (Hayes, 2013, p. 327). As illustrated in Figure 1, this model demonstrates how the mediating effects of social media news consumption (M) in the

relationship between social media use (X) and opinion polarization (Y) may differ based on one's exposure to like-minded information (V).

The results indicate that exposure to like-minded information significantly moderates the mediating effect of social media news consumption in the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization (CI [.0026, .0375]). Specifically, as Table 2 indicates, the indirect relationship between social media use and opinion polarization via social media news consumption is only significant when individuals are exposed to a high level of like-minded information (CI [.0063, .0733]). For people with moderate (CI [-.0002, .0482]) and low levels (CI [-.0300, .0252]) of exposure to like-minded information, the mediating effect of social media news consumption is insignificant.

Table 2. Conditional Indirect Effects of Social Media Use (X) on Opinion Polarization (Y) through Social Media News Consumption (M) at Different Levels of Like-Minded Information (V).

Mediator	Moderator (like-minded information)	B	SE	Bootstrap	
				LLCI	ULCI
Social media news consumption	Low	-.0009	.0133	-.0300	.0252
	Mean	.0152	.0119	-.0002	.0482
	High	.0313	.0163	.0063	.0733

Note. Bootstrapping results are bias corrected and accelerated; 5,000 bootstrap samples; demographics, political characteristics, media use, and exposure to non-like-minded information on social media were included into the equations as control variables, but not reported here because of space limitation. LLCI: Lower Level Confidence Interval; ULCI: Upper Level Confidence Interval.

Discussion

Employing a national survey in the U.S., this study investigates the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization on China's trade practices. Consistent with the previous literature that examined other issues (C. Lee et al., 2018; J. K. Lee et al., 2014), the findings indicate that time spent on social media platforms is not directly associated with opinion polarization. This insignificant relationship may be attributed to the fact that most Americans are indifferent to international affairs and thus do not closely follow information about the trade dispute on social media (Kohut & Toth, 1995; Rosentiel, 2006). Indeed, most people use social media not for hard news consumption but for entertainment and keeping update with their friends (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

This explanation can be supported to some extent by the subsequent analyses of the mediating role of social media news consumption. The results indicate that social media use indirectly polarizes people's attitude on China's trade practices via social media news consumption. In other words, consuming news about the trade dispute in social media is an essential step in relaying the relationship between social media use and opinion polarization. A closer look into the mediation model indicates that social media use is positively associated with news consumption related to the trade conflict, suggesting the potential of social media in enhancing the public's awareness of foreign policy issues. Despite this desirable outcome of social media use, news consumption on the trade conflict is found to polarize people's opinions on China's trade practices. It is worth noting that, as shown in Model in Table 1, exposure to the trade conflict news via

traditional media (e.g., television, newspaper, radio) does not polarize people's opinion on China's trade practices. Compared with traditional media, social media provide attentive users with abundant choices to seek out news consistent with their preexisting views (Dylko et al., 2018; Vargo et al., 2014). At the same time, individuals who are inattentive to the trade dispute may stumble upon news about this issue shared by their networked friends (J. K. Lee & Kim, 2017). Exposure to such socially endorsed news on social media is an effective way for the inattentive to form a strong opinion (Ohme, de Vreese, & Albaek, 2018). In sum, the polarizing effects of social media news consumption reflect social media's unique affordances compared with traditional media.

Furthermore, the moderated mediation model suggests that the mediating effect of social media news consumption is particularly strong among those who frequently encounter like-minded information about the trade conflict. Generally speaking, social media facilitate users to receive like-minded news due to the algorithmic design and people's tendency of avoiding cognitive dissonance (Bakshy et al., 2015; Sunstein, 2017). As a result, more exposure to like-minded news accentuate the polarizing effects of social media news consumption. As shown in Model 3 in Table 1, the moderating effect of like-minded news remains significant even after we controlled for exposure to non-like-minded news. In other words, even if a person is immersed in a heterogeneous information environment filled with both like-minded and non-like-minded news content, frequent news consumption on social media is still likely to polarize his or her opinion on China's trade practices. This is probably because exposure to non-like-minded news on social media often happens in an incidental fashion, and users do not pay much attention to such content they stumble upon (Brundidge, 2010; Lu & Lee, 2019a). Future research could extend this study by investigating different patterns of news consumption on social media, such as the interactive effects of selective exposure to like-minded news and incidental exposure to non-like-minded news on opinion polarization.

Opinion polarization is often considered detrimental to a democratic society because it makes the public and policy makers less likely to reach consensus and implement high-quality policies (Fishkin, 1995). With the public opinion polarized on China's trade practices, policy makers in the U.S. are unlikely to adopt a moderate and pragmatic approach to China, which will better serve the interests of both countries (Fravel, Roy, Swaine, Thornton, & Vogel, 2019). Also, given that polarized citizens are often more active in online and off-line political activities (Y. Kim, 2017), their voice is more likely to be heard by policy makers than that of other people who are indifferent to the trade dispute. In this case, the prevalence of social media in public life may help the current U.S. government secure public support for their hard-line approach in the contemporary U.S.-China relations. If the extreme opinions prevail, then it is likely to increase the tension between China and the United States and further dampen U.S.-China relations based on nonrational grounds.

Some limitations need to be noted in the interpretation of the findings. First, we cannot draw causal conclusions, because of the inherent nature of cross-sectional surveys. For example, our finding suggests that social media news consumption leads to opinion polarization about China's trade practices. Nevertheless, the reverse causal direction is also possible; that is, those people holding an extreme attitude are more likely to engage with trade conflict news on social media (Y. Kim, 2017). These conflicting arguments suggest the possibility of a spiral effect between social media news consumption and opinion polarization (Slater, 2007). To confirm the causality or test the spiral effect, future studies could employ multiwave panels or experiment designs. Second, this study does not explore the mechanism of opinion

polarization across different social media platforms, even though they are found to differ from each other in many aspects, such as the motivations of users (C. Kim & Lee, 2016). For example, while Twitter users tend to use the platform for information purposes, people primarily use Facebook and LinkedIn to fulfil the networking purpose (Hayes et al., 2016). Therefore, future studies should take into account these differences and focus on the social media platforms that Americans primarily use for exchanging political information and opinions. Third, the analysis of the moderated mediation model (i.e., H2) excluded 222 participants who did not have an opinion or held a neutral opinion about the U.S. government's trade policy. This exclusion weakened the generalizability of the finding as the participants remaining in the analysis tend to be more male, older, and have higher education and household income. Future research could address the limitation by adding a forced choice question among those who are excluded in the analysis of this study. Another alternative would be using two questions to measure each participant's intensity of support and opposition toward the government's trade policy (Hmielowski, Kim, Hutchens, & Beam, 2018), allowing scholars to examine how social media news consumption is related with opinion polarization among individuals with different levels of strength of their beliefs.

Despite such limitations, this study contributes to the literature by explaining the relationships among social media use, news consumption, and opinion polarization. The findings have significant implications for understanding the interaction between foreign policy and public opinion on international affairs in the contemporary media environment. Given the increasingly prominent role played by social media in citizens' public life, revealing mechanisms underlying these relationships can help assess the positive and negative impact of news consumption on social media in polarizing public opinion.

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Appendix: Demographic Information of the Sample

	<i>n</i>	% (<i>n</i> = 1,049)
Gender		
Male	515	49.1
Female	533	50.8
Age		
18–25	134	12.8
26–34	185	17.6
35–44	175	16.7
45–54	186	17.7
55–64	172	16.4
65 and above	197	18.8
Education		
High school or less	247	23.5
Some college/technical/associate's degree	431	41.1
College	230	21.9
Postgraduate	141	13.5
Income		
Less than \$30,000	331	31.6
\$30,000 to \$59,999	304	29.0
\$60,000 to \$99,999	240	22.9
\$100,000 to \$149,999	103	9.8
\$150,000 or more	71	6.8
Ethnicity		
White	717	68.4
Black/African American	142	13.5
American Indian/Alaska Native	38	3.6
Asian	56	5.3
Hispanic	185	17.6
Other	25	2.4