

Contextualizing the Effect of Digital Protest Appeals on Political Self-Expression: Evidence From a Cross-Case Comparison

MATTHEW DAVID JENKINS¹
Gyeongsang National University, Republic of Korea

Do digitally mediated weak-tie appeals to engage in connective action have the same effect everywhere? This study argues that the effect of weak-tie action appeals is contingent on citizenship norms and corresponding social network dynamics such that citizens in countries with higher levels of engaged norms are more likely to be motivated to endorse protest posts than those in countries with lower levels of engaged norms. To demonstrate this, I draw on an original cross-national survey experiment, the results of which show that digitally mediated weak-tie appeals to engage in protest have a more strongly positive effect on motivation to endorse the appeal among Koreans than Japanese respondents. Furthermore, the impact of weak-tie appeals exhibits considerable sensitivity to social network heterogeneity among Japanese respondents. The results of this study suggest that, although technology may in principle empower horizontal networks of citizens, its effect is contingent on norms of political behavior.

Keywords: social media, East Asia, connective action, social networks

The increasing frequency of large crowd-driven protests has given rise to theories of collective action positing that ostensibly leaderless horizontal networks are the central mobilizing force of contemporary mass action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Karpf, 2012). These theories hinge crucially on the dynamics of digitally mediated weak-tie networks insofar as one of the principal mechanisms of the process of diffusion of political information online is the accumulation of social media endorsements—"likes" and "shares"—through these weak-tie networks (Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasseri, 2016). Existing theories have deepened our understanding of this process, but they have not provided sufficient guidance in understanding how contextual factors shape it. Does exposure to political action appeals posted by weak-tie contacts have the same effect on motivation to endorse across disparate contexts, or does this effect vary across countries?

Matthew David Jenkins: mjenkins@gnu.ac.kr

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The present study advances connective action theory by examining the effect of context on weak-tie appeals, both theoretically and empirically. First, theoretical reasons to expect the effect of digitally mediated weak-tie appeals to be sensitive to differences in citizenship norms are proposed. Second, these expectations are tested through a survey experiment conducted in South Korea and Japan, two countries with quite different citizenship norms, with Korea exhibiting high aggregate levels of citizenship norms that favor participation in contentious mass action and Japan exhibiting low aggregate levels of such norms. The analysis of the results of this experiment show that weak-tie solicitations to protest more strongly motivated Korean respondents to endorse and share the post than Japanese respondents. Furthermore, exposure to protest appeals resulted in increased motivation to ignore the appeals, relative to respondents in the control group. These results suggest that the effect of weak-tie appeals to participate in protest is greater where protest is a socially normative behavior. Thus, there may be stronger cultural boundaries to digitally networked action than originally thought. This study concludes that scholars ought to further identify the nature of these boundaries, and it offers some suggestions regarding how this might be done.

Understanding Collective Action in the Digital Era

Collective action refers broadly to the joint action of individuals in pursuit of a common goal. This study concerns contentious collective action, which Beissinger (2002) defines as “potentially subversive acts that challenge normalized practices . . . or systems of authority” (p. 14). Between the late 1960s and early 1980s, resource mobilization theory emerged that advanced our understanding of collective action by showing that organizations often play a central role in facilitating mass action, primarily by providing a central structure capable of gaining control over resources (C. Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Resource mobilization theory provides a theoretical foundation for understanding mass action, but the diffusion of digital media has occasioned the flourishing of forms of mass political action that are not easily explained by reference to organizations, such as the digitally networked Yellow Vest protests in France (Nossiter, 2018), the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, and the Los Indignados movement of Spain, where horizontal activist networks deliberately sought to exclude organizations and political parties (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Here, the organizing function typically played by political organizations was carried out by digitally mediated horizontal networks composed of ordinary citizens. Hereafter, I refer broadly to this type of action as *digitally networked collective action* (DNCA).

One of the most influential theoretical accounts of DNCA is the theory of “connective action” propounded by Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013). According to the theory, the notable increase in networked collective action during the digital era is a result of the confluence of technological and sociocultural trends. With regard to technology, the authors point to a body of literature that describes how the diffusion of digital media and related technologies has lowered transactional costs involved in communication and organization (e.g., Castells, 2012; Shirky, 2009). In addition, the diffusion of social media has embedded individuals in vast weak-tie networks, making it easier for collective action appeals to spread.

Roughly coinciding with this technological change is the shift toward a political culture that tends to favor personalized means of political participation and self-expression over institutional means. Drawing on the work of Dalton and Wattenberg (2002) and Inglehart (1997), among others, Bennett and Segerberg

(2012, 2013) note that citizens of postindustrial nations now favor forms of political action that do not require adherence to a particular ideology and that are not tied to formal political organizations, instead preferring personalizable means of participation. In short, the authors argue that the affordances that connect citizens provide the perfect low-cost channel for this type of political exchange and self-expression, and that these are the mechanisms of networked collective action.

Weak-Tie Sharing and DNCA

Scholars have identified political sharing and social endorsement as the drivers of DNCA (Margetts et al., 2016), but the medium through which it is done is also critical, namely, digitally mediated weak-tie social networks. Social networks are structures that consist of a set of actors and the relationships between them (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 20). Sociological theory broadly classifies the relational ties between individuals into two types: strong (or thick) and weak (or thin). The category into which a given tie falls depends on its strength, which is defined as a function of three factors: the length that the tie has existed, the frequency of social exchange that occurs through it, and the degree of the emotional intensity with which a tie can be characterized (Granovetter, 1973). Examples of strong ties are those between close friends and family, whereas acquaintances (e.g., coworkers, neighbors) are generally considered weak ties.

The importance of weak ties in facilitating contagion-type phenomena was perhaps most famously elaborated by Granovetter (1973) in his seminal article "The Strength of Weak Ties," in which he points out that weak ties are critical to information transmission because of the way they connect distant subgroups, thereby permitting the free flow of a greater variety of information and stimuli. What has changed since the predigital era is that the spread of ICT has exponentially multiplied the number of possible weak-tie contacts any given individual can maintain and has increased the speed of information flow, thereby making possible the rapid expansion of online discussion into self-organizing networks of political action.

Connective Action and the Problem of Context

The theory of connective action presents an important advance in collective action theory. However, it is relatively silent on the question of whether or not to expect significant cross-national variation in the extent to which political action scales up through weak ties. As Rojas and Valenzuela (2019) point out, the task of clarifying how context affects the extent to which causal relationships maintain is a crucial task for advancing scientific knowledge, a task that tends to get marginalized in favor of studies of aggregate effects. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) acknowledge that this scaling-up can vary by issue and by the type of digital media involved, but their work is somewhat ambiguous regarding the extent to which the expected likelihood of the scaling-up of weak-tie networks is sensitive to context. To see this, consider their discussion of the use of technology in crowd-sourced mobilization. They argue,

With the recombinant nature of the DNA [digitally networked action] that emerges through this logic web spheres and their offline extensions go beyond communication systems to become flexible organizations in themselves . . . often enabling rapid action . . . even crossing temporal and geographic boundaries in the process. (p .41)

They further argue that the appearance of connective action in the Arab Spring suggests that the logic of connective action constitutes a set of mechanisms “through which similar forms of contention may diffuse across time and (very different) places” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 42). But are there contextual factors that make this scaling-up of action through weak-tie networks more or less likely to happen?

Network Properties and Weak-Tie Sharing

Another way to think of the questions above is as a problem of virality. That is, under what conditions does action go viral? We know that network structures vary widely across contexts, and that variation in network structures can be accompanied by variation in network dynamics (e.g., Siegel, 2009). If the structure and function of networks are at all affected by national context, such as culture or institutions, it is entirely reasonable to expect there to be cross-national differences in the extent to which weak-tie networks are conducive to political-sharing and -endorsing behavior. The literature strongly suggests that social network heterogeneity—the extent of political diversity in a social network—is crucial to contextualizing DNCA.² Hu, Lin, and Cui (2015) demonstrate that, as the number of weak ties (acquaintances) in a network increases, the extent of local network heterogeneity increases probabilistically. That is, the more acquaintances one has, the more likely one is to encounter individuals with divergent political views. We should then expect the scaling-up of action through weak ties to depend on the extent to which network heterogeneity does, in fact, have this effect. However, the literature is somewhat divided on whether or not this is true, with some studies showing a positive relationship between network heterogeneity and political participation (Barnidge, Huber, Gil de Zúñiga, & Liu, 2018; Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004; Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005; Scheufele et al., 2004), and other studies suggesting that network heterogeneity depresses political participation (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Heatherly, Lu, & Lee, 2017; Moehler & Conroy-Krutz, 2015; Mutz, 2002).

Hu and associates (2015) show that the effect of signals sent through weak-tie networks is highly sensitive to initial conditions. According to Hu and colleagues, the extent to which weak-tie networks propagate collective action depends on the preexisting aggregate willingness to engage in a particular action. Where there is a preexisting general willingness to participate among actors in a network, the heterogeneity generated by having numerous weak-tie contacts plays a critical role in generating collective action because of the way it occasions repeated exposure to appeals to action. Conversely, where there is a preexisting aversion toward participation, strong-tie connections and the emergent properties associated with them (i.e., network homogeneity) are more conducive to collective action. These results are supported by Larson (2017), who shows that novel information spread can be impeded by unwillingness to share across weak ties.

These findings have important implications for understanding cross-national variation in DNCA. At the aggregate level, these findings suggest that the effect of the diffusion of ICT will depend on preexisting willingness to participate in a given context. That is, the extent to which weak-tie sharing generates virality

² The term *social network heterogeneity* has been used to refer both to the degree of diversity in the political views of one’s social network (or “network diversity”) and exposure to difference (e.g., Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004). Here, I adopt the former definition.

will depend on individuals' baseline willingness to share political content, as well as the baseline willingness to respond to content posted by others. In this sense, the problem of identifying variation in DNCA reduces to that of identifying sources of variation in general willingness to participate in political sharing. In the following section, I argue that citizenship norms should be expected to have a broad influence on willingness to participate, and hence shape the parameters of connective action.

Citizenship Norms and Willingness to Participate

An emerging literature on citizenship norms argues that the broad cultural shifts identified by Inglehart (1997) has resulted in the emergence of a new set of democratic citizenship norms, which are defined as a "shared set of expectations about the citizen's role in politics" (Dalton, 2008, p. 78). Whereas democratic citizenship in the materialist era tended to be centered around institutionally sanctioned modes of participation, such as voting and contributing to campaigns, cultural change of the sort described by Inglehart has occasioned the emergence of a new set of citizenship norms, wherein the "good citizen" is now viewed as someone who is an active participant in a wide variety of noninstitutional forms of participation, such as protests and boycotts (Bennett, 2012; Dalton, 2008; Norris, 1999). Here, I follow other authors in this vein of scholarship (e.g., Copeland & Feezell, 2017; Hooghe, Oser, & Marien, 2016) in using Dalton's (2008) distinction between "duty-based" and "engaged" norms, with the latter referring to norms that favor noninstitutional participation and self-expression or a combination of institutional and noninstitutional participation (Copeland & Feezell, 2017, p. 807).

From the perspective of connective action theory, it would make sense to view the emergence of engaged citizenship norms as a consequence of postmaterialist values given that postmaterialist values favor self-expression over pure material concerns. One problem with such a view, however, is that there does not appear to be an empirical link between citizenship norm type and postmaterialism. Hooghe and cohorts (2016), drawing on a 38-country study, confirmed that the engaged-dutiful norms distinction is relevant to a broad array of countries, but they also found that aggregate norm distribution is uncorrelated with the political system and level of economic development.

Another possibility, of course, is that citizenship norms independently affect collective action by exerting a strong influence on individuals' initial willingness to participate. There are at least two ways in which citizenship norms might affect initial willingness to participate: internal motivation and social influence. With regard to internal motivation, those who see protest as an expected or normative behavior—those with engaged norms, or "engaged citizens"—should have a lower participation threshold, and hence should be expected to be more strongly affected by calls to action encountered online. We should therefore also expect collective action to spread more easily through weak-tie networks in countries with high proportions of engaged citizens than in countries with lower proportions of engaged citizens.

Second, assuming there is a general awareness of citizenship norms in most countries, we should expect the baseline pressure to participate to be higher in countries with high proportions of engaged citizens given that the social pressure to participate should also be higher than where there is a lower proportion of engaged citizens. The reasoning, here, follows from the literature on social influence, which shows that social influence from peers and acquaintances, both digitally mediated (Bond et al., 2012; Margetts et al.,

2016) and otherwise (Gerber, Green, & Larimer, 2008; Sinclair, 2012), can exert a strong effect on a number of political behaviors. Social influence is a particularly important determinant of online behavior because online actions, such as sharing or endorsing digital content, can be instantaneously observed and surveilled by virtually every individual in that network.

Hypothesis

Given the discussion above, we can draw the following inference about cross-national variation in the propensity to endorse digital appeals to engage in collective action: In societies with high aggregate levels of engaged norms, we should expect the average baseline motivation to participate of individuals in a network to be relatively high. *Ceteris paribus*, we should then expect appeals to engage in collective action encountered online to more strongly motivate individuals to endorse them as compared with individuals in societies with lower levels of engaged norms.

H1: Protest appeals received from weak-tie contacts will, on average, have a greater effect on motivation to endorse for individuals in countries with high levels of engaged norms than for those in countries with low levels of engaged norms.

The corollary to this hypothesis is that strong-tie appeals will have a stronger effect among individuals in countries with lower aggregate levels of engaged norms. However, it is also possible that both strong-tie and weak-tie appeals have similar effects in contexts characterized by engaged norms. Accordingly, I posed this as the following research question:

RQ1: Is there a difference between the effect of protest appeals received from strong-tie contacts and that of appeals received from weak-tie contacts on motivation to endorse for individuals in countries with high levels of engaged norms than for those in countries with low levels of engaged norms?

Case Selection and Comparative Strategy

As Tarrow (2008) points out, paired-case comparisons allow us to see how the effects of independent variables vary across national context while at the same time permitting an interpretation of the results that draws on deeper knowledge of the cases than is possible when a larger number of cases are examined. Here, such an approach is warranted because it permits a deeper understanding of the way scaling-up differs across political cultures.

Japan and South Korea were selected as the cases for the present analysis following the logic of the most similar systems design, wherein cases are selected to allow for maximum similarity on a range of variables, except for key variables of interest. Japan and South Korea share a number of contextual similarities, making them ideal for a paired-case comparison (Arrington, 2016; Lee & Arrington, 2008). For instance, they have similar levels of socioeconomic development, collectivist cultures (Dalton & Shin, 2006;

Hui & Triandis, 1986; Inglehart & Welzel, 2010), and similar levels of Internet penetration (Internet World Stats, 2017) and Twitter use (Mocanu et al., 2013).³

Despite these broad contextual similarities, the two countries have contrasting collective action profiles, with the percentage of Koreans reporting participation in contentious action consistently far higher than that of Japan (M. D. Jenkins, 2019). Existing evidence suggests that there are differences in citizenship norms as well. Whereas research shows that Koreans share an ideal of active citizen involvement in politics and contentious action (Arrington, 2016; Cho, Kim, & Kim, 2019), much of the literature on political participation in Japan provides little evidence of a widespread shared ideal of active involvement in contentious politics (Haddad, 2007; Inoguchi, 2002a; Maclachlan, 2002). Rather, extant research indicates that Japanese citizens tend to prefer subtler methods of political participation (Maclachlan, 2002; Vinken, Nishimura, White, & Deguchi, 2010). The literature suggests that this is a consequence both of the structure of the Japanese state as well as Japan's political culture. As Vinken and colleagues (2010) point out, Japan has a strong activist state with wide linkages to civil society, and Japanese tend to have a "strong idea of government responsibility . . . and weak ideas of individual responsibility" (p. 8). Consequently, there tends to be a stronger norm of participation in such embedded organizations rather than individual participation in independent mass action (Inoguchi, 2002a; Pekkanen, 2003). Furthermore, as Inoguchi (2002b) points out, the type of social ties associated with spontaneous mass political action is less likely to develop in Japan owing to the sparsity of social ties among socially distant individuals. Given these findings, it is fair to assume that Korean citizens have stronger norms of political engagement than do Japanese citizens, at least as it relates to contentious political action. This is assessed empirically below.

If the present analysis reveals no difference in the effect of digitally mediated weak-tie appeals, then the technological optimism found in many contemporary theories of collective action will have found some support. If, however, there are differences in this effect, then scholars will have reason to more seriously consider the connection between social norms and the use of technology for mass mobilization.

Method

The data for this study came from an original survey experiment developed and conducted by me in South Korea and Japan. The data were collected by Qualtrics between August 21, 2018, and September 24, 2018. Quota sampling by age, sex, education, and income was used to ensure that the samples were roughly representative of their respective populations.⁴ The data set was cleaned to ensure that only valid

³ The most recent World Values Survey data show that Koreans score on average about 0.78 higher on the 4-point postmaterialist index after controlling for demographic variables, but both are closer to the materialist pole of the index, with Japanese scoring on average a 1.08 on the 4-point index and Koreans scoring 2.04. Moreover, this study constitutes a most similar systems design, wherein the goal is to leverage broad similarities between two cases to identify a smaller number of subtler differences—as I do here—underlying differences in the outcome variable.

⁴ Qualtrics recruits respondents by contacting individuals in a rotating panel and filtering by demographic characteristics. Respondents' IP addresses suggest that most of the respondents lived in urban or suburban areas of Japan and Korea. This may pose some limitation to the generalizability of the results.

responses were analyzed following the procedure described by Kohama, Inamasu, and Tago (2017). The resulting data set totaled 1,493 respondents ($n_{\text{Japan}} = 1,079$, $n_{\text{Korea}} = 414$), with 46% of the total respondents female and 53% male.⁵

A randomized factorial experiment was embedded in the instrument. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three groups: a weak-tie ("acquaintance") treatment group, a strong-tie ("friend") treatment group, or a control group. Respondents in both the acquaintance and friend treatment groups were shown a digital appeal to protest that was made to appear as if it had been posted to social media by the subject's friend or acquaintance, the names of which were provided by the subject in a pretreatment survey item. Protest was chosen because Tilly (2008) identifies it as one of the quintessential contentious performances, and it is a widely used action in both Korea and Japan. All simulated posts were presented as tweets on the Twitter social media service because this is the platform shown by Valenzuela, Correa, and Gil de Zúñiga (2018) to be most conducive to weak-tie political sharing and because Twitter diffusion in the two countries is nearly identical as shown by Mocanu and associates (2013).⁶ After being shown the post, I asked respondents how motivated they were to endorse the post, share the post, or ignore it. All posts were first piloted with Japanese and Korean citizens to achieve verisimilitude before being launched. Feedback from these pilots indicated that the treatment was reasonably convincing.

Following Bond and colleagues (2012), I showed respondents in the control group a neutral informative message that conveyed the facts of the reason behind the protest, but without calling for action to address it. Following Nekmat, Gower, Gonzenbach, and Flanagan (2015), I based the protest appeal on a valence issue involving local community problems to minimize the confounding influence of ideology and national issue salience. Respondents in the treatment groups were shown social media posts that called for action (protest) to be taken to address the lack of public disclosure of an inordinate level of radiation exposure, and the control post simply relayed the fact that the public was exposed to high levels of radiation exposure without being notified. Balance checks showed that the randomization procedure was largely successful, resulting in treatment and control groups that were roughly equal across a range of theoretically relevant covariates (age, sex, etc.). A full discussion of survey methodology and descriptive statistics are included in the online Appendix.⁷

The main independent variable was a dummy that indicated whether a given subject was in the treatment (1) or control group (0). There were three dependent variables: self-reported motivation to "like" the post, motivation to "share" the post, and motivation to ignore the post, all on a scale of 0 to 100, where 100 indicated the highest motivation. These measures were chosen because they are central to the process of virality. If the theory that I have posed is correct, protest information and social support for protest should spread faster in countries with a high level of engaged norms, thereby increasing the likelihood of the emergence or acceleration of offline protest, as suggested by Margetts and cohorts (2016). In this sense,

⁵ The disparity in sample size is due to a clerical error on the part of the survey company.

⁶ Note that, because these were simulated social media posts, this is largely an aesthetic choice. That is, both sets of respondents were likely to be familiar with the Twitter platform.

⁷ The appendix is freely available at https://www.dropbox.com/s/83s725bpxavhmb4/Latex_Appendix_IJOC_Jenkins.pdf?dl=0

motivation to endorse or share a post provides an indication of the extent to which weak-tie appeals will stimulate the processes that drive scaling by encouraging self-expression in the public sphere, which is the core mechanism in the theory of connective action.

Following Cho and associates (2019), who view engaged norms as being roughly equivalent to a preference for participatory democracy, I measured level of engaged norms as the difference between the extent to which respondents believe that ordinary citizens should be more involved in politics and the extent to which they believe politics ought to be left to professional politicians, both of which were given on a Likert scale. This procedure resulted in a variable that ranged from -3 to 4 , with a mean of 1.700 ($SD = 1.83$). The results showed that, on average, Koreans scored 0.343 ($SD = 0.186$) higher on the index than did Japanese when controlling for demographic variables. These results confirm that Korean respondents in this sample had much higher levels of engaged norms on average than their Japanese counterparts.

The instrument also included a question that was designed to further explore citizenship norms by asking respondents about their attitudes toward protesters. The item asked what the respondent generally thinks about those who protest, and then provided a list of word choices, some negative ("strange," "rebellious"), some positive ("good citizen"), and some neutral ("normal").

To directly examine the effect of social network heterogeneity, the instrument included three items that measured social network heterogeneity (network diversity). Each item asked respondents to rate the extent to which the people they know are different from each other in terms of their political views on a 0 to 10 scale, with higher values indicating more political diversity. The items asked respondents about strong-tie contacts (friends and family) and weak-tie contacts (acquaintances). This method of measurement was based on the approach taken in the 2012 East Asian Social Survey, which was designed to obtain valid measures of network heterogeneity across different East Asian contexts. A social network heterogeneity index was constructed by adding respondents' scores for the three items. Each item was summed to result in an index that ranged from 0 to 30, where higher values indicated more social network heterogeneity. The idea was to measure the subjective perception of the extent to which respondents perceive themselves as being exposed to cross-cutting views. The mean value of this variable was 15.13 ($SD = 5.28$).

Hypothesis 1 was tested by finding the difference between the average treatment effect (ATE) for Japanese respondents and that for Korean respondents. This quantity was estimated using ordinary least squares by the following model:

$$Y = \beta + \alpha T + \gamma C + \delta TC + \varepsilon.$$

Here, C is a country dummy, T is a treatment dummy that takes a value of 1 if the respondent received the treatment and 0 if the respondent was assigned to the control group, and δ gives the difference between the ATE for Japanese and Korean respondents.

Results

Figure 1a shows the difference between the ATE of the weak-tie protest appeal among Korean respondents and that among Japanese respondents, with 95% confidence intervals indicated by whiskers. Looking at the far-left plot in Figure 1a, we see that the treatment increased motivation to endorse (“like”) the protest post by about 10.5 points more among Korean respondents than it did for Japanese respondents (95% CI [2.10, 19.02], $p < .05$). This is about one third of a standard deviation of the dependent variable in the total sample, making it a fairly substantial difference ($SD = 32.11$). Looking at the middle plot in Figure 1a, we see similar effects when the dependent variable is motivation to share the post, although the results fall short of statistical significance (95% CI [-2.58, 14.14]). The final plot in Figure 1a shows the effect of the treatment on motivation to ignore the post. At -8.59 (95% CI [-17.21, 0.52]), the coefficient indicates that the treatment more strongly increased motivation to ignore the protest post among Japanese respondents relative to Korean respondents. Overall, these results lend some support to Hypothesis 1 insofar as they suggest that weak-tie appeals do appear to more strongly motivate Korean respondents to endorse the protest post, whereas it appears to have made Japanese respondents less inclined to endorse the post and more inclined to ignore it relative to their Korean counterparts.⁸

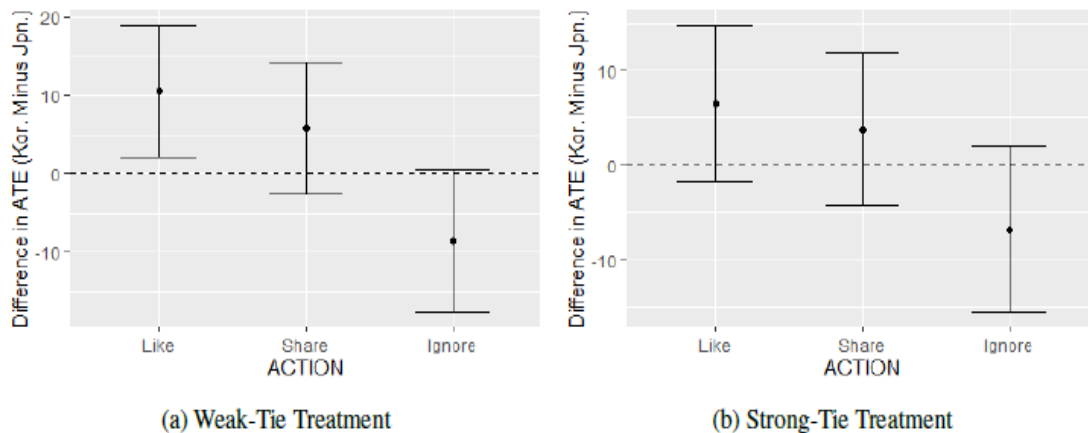


Figure 1. Difference in average treatment effect (ATE; Korea-Japan).

Turning to Research Question 1, the results of the analysis reveal a pattern similar to that of Figure 1a, with strong-tie appeals causing larger increases in motivation to like and share the protest post among Korean respondents than among Japanese respondents (see Tables A11 and A12 and Figure A2 in the online Appendix). However, because none of the estimates reached statistical significance, it

⁸ In addition to these main effects, some demographic differences in the treatment effect were also discovered. Namely, the largest differences between the ATEs of the two groups of respondents were observed for the lowest age group (age 18–34 years) of each country and the highest age group (age 55+) of each country. The difference between the ATE for the middle group, on the other hand, was small (1.067) and statistically insignificant. These results are shown in Table A10 of the online Appendix.

would appear that there is less of a difference in the effect of strong-tie appeals between the two groups of respondents. The analysis did not reveal any significant demographic differences between the strong-tie ATEs of the groups. It is worth noting, however, that both the strong-tie and weak-tie treatments appear to have reduced motivation to endorse and share the protest post among Japanese respondents. Why might this be the case?

One possibility suggested by the literature is that it is a consequence of a spiral of silence-like effect (Matthes, Knoll, & von Sikorski, 2018). In other words, it might be the case that the network heterogeneity that accompanies weak ties dampens willingness to engage in public expression when it concerns actions that are not socially normative. Such an explanation is suggested by previous studies of political expression in Japan (e.g., Miyata, Yamamoto, & Ogawa, 2015; Tokinoya, 1989). Miyata and colleagues (2015), for instance, found that Japanese are far less willing to post on social media when they are unsure whether they have the majority opinion, resulting in the spiral of silence effect most famously elaborated by Noelle-Neumann (1993). It is reasonable to expect this effect to be more pronounced when the action under consideration is not socially normative given that endorsing such an action might incur a heavier social cost. In other words, it might be the case that Japanese citizens recognize the potential of alienating someone in their social network as a consequence of endorsing protest content online, and that the likelihood of facing such a cost is higher in the context of a heterogeneous social network.

To assess this possibility, I examined how the social network heterogeneity index described above interacted with the treatment using ordinary least squares. The results of this procedure are presented in Figures 2a and 2b.

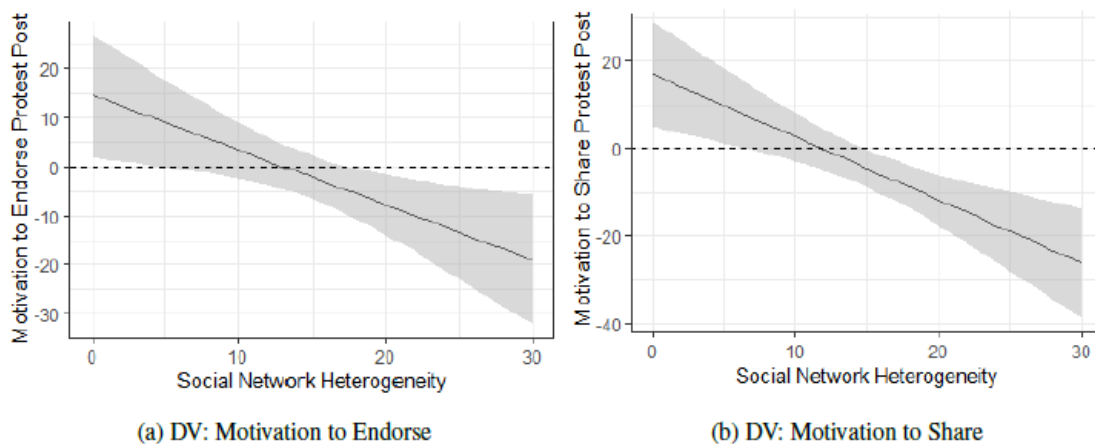


Figure 2. Weak-tie average treatment effect conditional on social network heterogeneity (Japanese respondents only).

Figure 2a shows the predicted conditional average treatment effect on motivation to endorse the protest appeal across the full range of social network heterogeneity for Japanese respondents, and Figure

2b shows the same when motivation to share was the dependent variable.⁹ Looking at Figure 2a, we see that a 1.0-unit increase along the 0–30 scale of network heterogeneity resulted in a roughly 1.12 decrease in motivation to endorse a protest when posted by an acquaintance among Japanese respondents. This effect was statistically significant at the .05 level ($p = .03$). This point estimate may not seem like a substantially large effect, but, as Figure 2a makes clear, those with the most heterogeneous networks exhibited about a 20-point decrease in motivation to endorse a protest message posted by an acquaintance. Figure 2b shows similar findings for when the dependent variable was motivation to share the post, with each additional unit increase in social network heterogeneity resulting in a 1.43 decrease in the treatment effect (95% CI $[-2.22, -0.66]$). All results were robust to the inclusion of controls, as shown in Table A13 in the online Appendix.

If these negative effects are indeed the result of a feared social cost, we should further expect there to be a high likelihood of strong negative sentiment toward protest or protest participation. Such a result is obliquely implied by the low level of engaged citizenship norms among Japanese respondents. Lapinski and Rimal (2005) identify two types of collective norms: injunctive and descriptive. The former refers to shared ideas about what ought to be done, whereas the latter refers to shared perceptions of what is actually done. The citizenship norms described by Dalton (2008) are types of injunctive norms because they concern shared perceptions of what good citizens ought to do. As mentioned, extant research indeed suggests that Korean citizens appear to share this injunctive norm, whereas Japanese citizens do not appear to share it.

What is not clear, however, is whether there is a negative corollary to this positive injunctive. In other words, if Japanese citizens tend not to see protest as something citizens ought to do, do they then view protest as something that good citizens ought not to do? If so, the absence of a treatment effect among Japanese respondents, and the negative effect of heterogeneity, can in part be explained by the presence of an implied negative injunctive norm. In other words, it might be the case that Japanese respondents do not want to publicly endorse protest posts because protest is something good citizens ought to refrain from, all the more so when they are situated in a heterogeneous network wherein it is difficult to be certain whether or not one is in the majority on a given issue; hence, it is less clear that the good to be gained from violating such a norm is worth the cost.

To assess this possibility, I examined respondents' attitudes toward protesters by plotting the proportion of respondents that described protesters as "good citizens," along with the proportion of respondents describing protesters with negative descriptors. The results are shown in Figure 3 (Figures 3a and 3b). Whereas about 12% of Korean respondents described protesters as "good citizens," only about 2.5% of Japanese respondents did so. And, whereas less than 3% percent of Korean respondents described protesters as "dangerous," more than 6% of Japanese respondents did so. One of the most striking differences is that between the proportion of Japanese respondents who described protesters as "strange" ($\sim 9\%$) and the proportion of Korean respondents who did so ($\sim 1.6\%$). By contrast, similar proportions of

⁹ This same heterogeneity analysis was performed with the data from Korean respondents, but no interaction effect was found. This could be interpreted as lending support to the interpretation of the results for Japanese respondents. Alternatively, it could be an artifact of the smaller Korean sample size.

both groups described protesters as “rebellious.” Although this is a largely informal probe, the results indeed suggest that protest carries a social stigma among Japanese.¹⁰

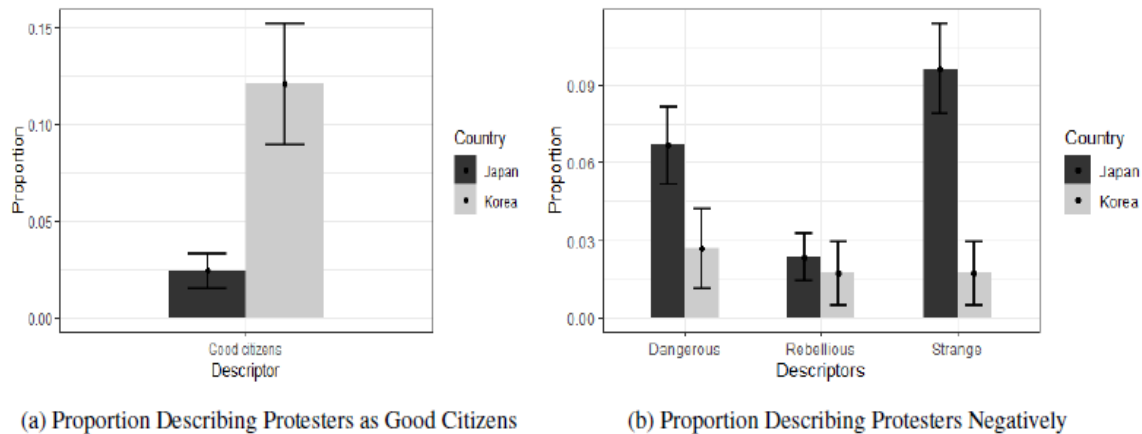


Figure 3. Respondents' descriptions of protesters.

Discussion

With regard to the primary motivating question of this study, the results of the experiment suggest that weak-tie appeals to engage in protest do not have the same effect on motivation to endorse the appeals in Korea and Japan. Whereas they have the theoretically expected effect in Korea, weak-tie appeals appear to have the inverse effect in Japan insofar as they discourage political self-expression. The heterogeneity analysis suggests that this expression-reducing effect of weak-tie appeals may be a consequence of the social implications of being associated with a nonnormative political action. Specifically, the results suggest that, in Japan, individuals perceive themselves as situated in a digital environment wherein political expression—in the form of endorsing a protest on social media—may provide some benefit, but this potential benefit is outweighed by the potential cost of incurring the reprimand of individuals or groups in their social network as result of violating a social norm. Furthermore, the perceived probability of incurring this cost appears to increase more or less in parallel with the extent to which they perceive themselves as being in a politically diverse environment, perhaps because heterogeneous environments induce uncertainty about the degree of social consensus on the question of whether or not a particular political issue warrants deviation from the norm.

The analysis also shows that the effect of weak-tie appeals varies according to which type of expression is being considered, with smaller differences between the ATE of the treatment on sharing behavior than for endorsing. It is unclear why this is the case. It could be that sharing posts carries a more ambiguous meaning, as sharing may or may not indicate that one endorses the content of a post. Or it could

¹⁰ In Japan, protest acquired this stigma as a result of its association with violent radical movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Ando, 2013).

be a result of a perceived higher social cost associated with sharing for both groups of respondents given that shared posts are arguably more visible than “likes,” and they remain on one’s social media page for most platforms.¹¹ It could also be an artifact of the order of the dependent variable question items (i.e., it could be a consequence of the fact that the “like” question appeared before the “share” question, although this seems unlikely, given the consistency of the response pattern).

This study is a preliminary inquiry into cross-national differences in connective action, but the results presented here suggest that the central dynamic of connective action—the scaling-up of action through weak ties—is more likely to occur where the actions involved are normative political behaviors and less likely to happen where such actions are nonnormative behaviors: People are less willing to publicly endorse actions that conflict with societal norms, especially when the push to do so comes from an acquaintance. Furthermore, the results suggest that, in such a context, strong-tie appeals might be more effective, although the results in this regard are mostly suggestive, given the lack of statistical power in the present study.

Conclusion

Connective action theory views the diffusion of ICT as a transformative development in mass political action. Although this may be true, it is important to recognize that this transformative effect operates within identifiable boundaries. In this study, I show that the central dynamic of connective action—the scaling-up of action through the numerous weak-tie connections that ICT sustains—is more likely to occur where the actions involved are normative political behaviors, and less likely to happen where such actions are nonnormative behaviors: People are less willing to publicly endorse actions that conflict with societal norms, especially when the push to do so comes from an acquaintance. The heterogeneity analysis further suggests that other network dynamics thought to be associated with the spread of collective action through digital media are likewise dependent on cultural context, which follows from the fact that the extent to which weak ties and the emergent properties associated with them are conducive to virality depends on initial willingness to participate in political expression, which in turn is at least partly determined by citizenship norms.

¹¹ Both “like” and “share” are examples of “affordances,” meaning that, although they may have an intended purpose, how they are actually used depends on how the technology itself is perceived, how potential users interact with it, its effects on users, and so forth (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 2). In the present case, the affordance provided by a “like” was artificially constrained by the experimental design. Given these constraints, it is probable that a “like” will be interpreted as a relatively unambiguous endorsement of a protest appeal, even if this may not be true of digital protest appeals generally. Sharing, however, may be a weaker signal of endorsement, because a shared post is commonly accompanied by user-generated text at the top of the shared post, which may be supportive or critical of the shared content. So, even if commenting on shared posts was not enabled in the present set-up, it is possible that users had this functionality in mind when assessing their motivation to share the protest post. Of course, it is also possible that respondents had other intentions in mind when indicating their motivation to like the post, but, in the latter case, it is less clear that there were any affordances that, a priori, make this likely.

This finding has broad theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it suggests that collective action theory, and perhaps political communication more broadly, could benefit from affording additional attention to the way in which political culture moderates the effect of ICT use on political behavior. As noted by Pinch and Bijker (1984), the way technology is used is in large part a function of the way relevant social groups perceive it, and this can in turn be a function of political culture. Most scholars recognize this at some level, but cultural explanations are often avoided because culture is an inherently “squishy” and potentially controversial concept that is difficult to define, operationalize, measure, and validate. What the results here suggest is that, rather than avoiding culture, scholars ought to think about specific aspects of culture that are relevant to a given political domain.

This study has limitations that can be improved on in further studies. First, the experimental design can be refined and broadened to include a larger number of countries, and to more closely examine differences across action types, such as boycotts and petitions. Second, the results of this study can be further validated by examining network effects in social media data. Future studies would do well to incorporate a longitudinal dimension to better assess the relationships posited here, as well as to include more cases to better assess the extent of causality and generalizability of the effects found here. Third, by outlining a broad theory, this study has necessarily undertheorized potential interaction effects with demographic variables, such as age, gender, and ethnicity. Theorizing and identifying these interaction effects are critical tasks, which this study entrusts to future studies of digital politics. Fourth, it is important to recognize the possibility of the influence of unobserved cultural factors. However, both countries are consolidated constitutional democracies with vibrant civil societies that broadly share collectivist values, and both exhibit high ICT use at nearly all levels of society. As such, it is not clear what these unobserved cultural differences would be; however, given the pace at which ICT is evolving, it is possible that subtler differences in their technopolitical cultures may eventually emerge.

Finally, it is important to point out that political culture is but one piece of the puzzle. As I have suggested here, institutions, organizations, and influential individuals also exert a direct effect on the potential for DNCA. In this article, I have shown that political culture—in the form of citizenship norms—is an important factor that also has a direct bearing on DNCA precisely because of its socially constructed nature. A holistic approach to DNCA will seek to understand how technology, political culture, and institutions interact with each other to result in a given collective action environment (Karpf, 2020).

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