Media Use and Political Engagement:
Cross-Cultural Approaches

Introduction

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Democracies around the world are struggling with the decline of civic and political engagement. At the same time, new forms of engagement such as lifestyle politics, Internet activism, and political consumerism are on the rise. In this introduction to the Special Section, we argue that citizens are increasingly engaging through informal, creative, and digitally networked activities, thereby moving political engagement into the domain of entertainment and personalized communication on the Internet and in social media. Moreover, we advocate a cross-cultural approach to explore how media use contributes to political participation in a globalized, mediatized world. The studies assembled in this Special Section show that political engagement through using media hinges on cultural parameters such as political structures, political leaders, press freedom, neo-tribes, degrees of tightness, postmaterialist values, norms, and localized versus

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centralized patterns of information disorder, to mention a few. Implications of the studies and suggestions for future research direction are discussed.

Keywords: media use, online information, entertainment, cross-cultural comparison, political engagement, emerging media

Democracies around the world are struggling with the decline of civic and political engagement, especially among younger generations (Bessant, Farthing, & Watts, 2016; Kitanova, 2020). World Value Surveys and the Eurobarometer have yielded alarming results (Whiteley, 2012), showing that young people in Western countries are increasingly dissatisfied with and disinterested in liberal democracy (Foa & Mounk, 2017; Sloam, 2016). Simultaneously, increasing new forms of engagement such as lifestyle politics, Internet activism, and political consumerism parallel this trend (Dalton, 2004; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018).

These developments have contributed to a new understanding of citizenship, one in which citizens are increasingly engaging through informal, creative, and digitally networked activities, thereby moving political engagement into the domain of entertainment and personalized communication (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Activities that formerly took place "offline" (such as demonstrations, signing petitions, and political discussions) have now moved online and work in concert with offline civic engagement (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). They include a wide range of phenomena such as using social networking sites (SNS) to access information and organize protests, using digital platforms to exchange views, and using mobile applications to access government services (Bala, 2014). Although many of these emergent behaviors are not yet fully understood, their global rise is evident in countless examples of collective action in the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the United States, rendering them a timely topic to study from a cross-cultural perspective.

Existing scholarship focuses on the social and psychological factors connecting media use and political engagement (Hsiao, 2018; Hsiao & Yang, 2018; Valenzuela, Correa, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). Social identity, efficacy, injustice perceptions, emotions, values, and system justification beliefs have been identified as crucial psychosocial predictors of digitally enabled political engagement (Hsiao, 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2018; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). Despite the increasing interest in the role of psychosocial variables in the association between media and political engagement, however, our understanding of these effects remains insufficient and largely confined to Western democratic contexts (see Hsiao, 2018, for an overview). A few authors have investigated mediated mechanisms of political engagement in the non-Western world, including Brazil (Cardoso, Lapa, & Di Fátima, 2016), Chile (Valenzuela et al., 2018), China and Japan (Yang & Ogawa, 2018), Hong Kong—China (Hsiao, 2018), Korea (Seo, 2022), Mexico (Meneses Rocha, Ortega Gutiérrez, & Urbina Cortés, 2017), South Africa (Malila & Oelofsen, 2016), and Turkey (Odağ, Uluğ, & Solak, 2016). In addition, the role of the media has been studied more closely in prominent cases of collective action in the Middle East, such as the Egyptian uprising (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012) or the Arab Spring (McGarty, Thomas, Lala, Smith, & Bliuc, 2014). These "culture-specific" studies have consistently shown SNSs' potential in catalyzing autonomous political action and in mobilizing network ties that reinforce political efficacy beliefs as well as a shared political identity. This research has also shown, across the world, that SNS contribute to the shaping of a new *networked* culture

of political engagement that is largely independent of political institutions and repressive governments. While invaluable in demonstrating media-enabled and social-psychological mechanisms of political participation from within their *local* contexts, this research has been impressively void of cross-culturally comparative approaches (for exceptions, see Chan, Chen, & Lee, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga & Liu, 2017; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2022; Leissner, Valentim, Porten-Cheé, & Emmer, 2019). This is even though communication science, and most specifically political communication, has embraced cross-culturally comparative research designs (de Vreese, 2017; Esser & Hanitsch, 2012a; Pfetsch & Esser, 2012).

Cross-cultural comparisons have certain advantages over one-country research designs and, like any research, disadvantages, too: First, cross-cultural comparisons allow researchers to test the universal versus context-specific applicability of their claims and avoid overgeneralization (Esser & Hanitsch, 2012b). Second, comparing across different contexts makes assumptions in our research visible and facilitates the questioning of ethnocentric biases. Third, the relationship between media use and political engagement is likely influenced by the political structures and value systems into which it is embedded. Cross-culturally comparative approaches can be highly insightful toward carving out the local versus global patterns of this relationship (Volk, 2021). Fourth, cross-cultural comparisons function like a field experiment in the sense of testing causal claims. Cross-cultural comparisons of the relationship between media use and political engagement can be conceptualized similarly in terms of quasi-experimental causal conditions that produce variance in political communication behavior (Pfetsch & Esser, 2012). Finally, cross-cultural comparison is not simply about comparing communication phenomena across several countries. More important is the empirical isolation of the *source* of such differences, using a cross-cultural theoretical rationale. Individualism–collectivism dimensions, various conceptualizations of values, the tightness–looseness concept, shared beliefs, and patterns of behavior (for a detailed overview, see Smith, Fischer, Vignoles, & Bond, 2014) constitute only a few of the theories at our disposal when making cross-culturally comparative inferences (e.g., concerning entertainment communication: Odağ, 2021; concerning media effects more generally: Kim & Eom, 2019; Odağ & Hanke, 2019).

Cross-Cultural Approaches to Media Use and Political Engagement

This Special Section aims to highlight the influence of cultural factors (political regimes, cultures, cultural identities, etc.) on the relationship between media use and political engagement. It showcases cross-culturally comparative qualitative and quantitative empirical studies that examine the role of media use in political engagement and whose central purpose is to understand cultural variance in the theories produced on the topic. All studies in this Special Section thus focus on comparing at least two cultural contexts. Rather than simply comparing national samples of choice, they also have in common that they bring some existing theory of cultural difference into their design and explain their findings based on this rationale.

Before we introduce the contributions, we like to acknowledge the background of this Special Section. It was instigated as part of the Young Scholars Network Initiative *Culture, Media Uses, and Media Effects* (www.cmuse.de), led by Özen Odağ and funded by the German Research Association. The network assembled scholars from cross-cultural psychology, media psychology, and communication as well as quantitative and qualitative research traditions, intending to create synergies and spark context-sensitive research. Our network was guided by inputs from renowned senior researchers in the field such as the cross-

cultural psychologist Ype Poortinga (e.g., Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011; Poortinga, 2021), and communication scholars Mary Beth Oliver and Art Raney (e.g., Oliver & Raney, 2011; Oliver et al., 2018; Raney, Janicke-Bowles, Oliver, & Dale, 2021). The ideas for this Special Section originated in network gatherings at Touro College Berlin between 2016 and 2019 and resulted in research collaborations (see the two contributions by Regina Arant, Katja Hanke, Alexandra Mittelstädt, Rosemary Pennington, Audris Umel, and Özen Odağ and by Frank Schneider, Katharina Knop-Huelss, Jinhee Kim, Larisa Buhin, Miriam Gröning, Audris Umel, and Özen Odağ).

This Special Section includes studies pursuing two strands of research: the role of selected *media functions and formats* (such as information and entertainment, profiles of online fandom, and visual communication formats) and the role of *psychosocial factors* (such as values, ideals, political identity, and perceived efficacy) in political engagement.

Cross-Cultural Studies on the Role of Media Information, Media Entertainment, and Visual Communication Formats in Political Engagement

In their article, "News Podcast Use, Press Freedom, and Political Participation: A Cross-National Study of 38 Countries," Yoonmo Sang, Sunyoung Park, Jiwon Kim, and Sora Park examine the use of news podcasts as digital-born alternative news media and their effects on political participation across countries with varying degrees of press freedom. Using the citizen communication mediation model developed in Western countries, the authors situate the key structural variable (press freedom) into the relationships among trust in news, news podcasts use, political discussion, and political participation. Using secondary data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019) and the press freedom scores indexed by Freedom House (2019), the authors show that the use of news podcasts is more prevalent in countries with low press freedom scores (e.g., Chile, Croatia, Brazil, and Turkey) and that the frequency of news podcasts use is associated with online/offline political participation through active online political discussion around news. According to this study, the role of news podcasts in mobilizing individuals for political engagement is critical, particularly in countries where press freedom is not fully guaranteed and political information is not readily available from mainstream media (for a similar finding, see Arant et al.'s contribution).

In "When Pop and Politics Collide: A Transcultural Perspective on Contested Practices in Pop Idol Fandoms in China and the West," Qian Huang, Simone Driessen, and Daniel Trottier explore the politicization of pop culture through the concept of *fandom* in two cases: Xiao Zhan, a rising data traffic pop idol in China, and Taylor Swift, a famous American singer. Their comparison allows for a nuanced understanding of the culture-specific dynamics created in the relationship between fandom and political engagement, in which politicized identities are created around affective bonds and mundane fandom practices. Fandoms are conceptualized as neo-tribes formed around taste and interest in cultural products or lifestyles and constructed as well as deconstructed through digital activities. Using in-depth interviews with Xiao Zhan and Swift fans, the study demonstrates how the engagement of youth with their idols through social media (in the form of politicking, consumption, and production) inspires political debate and constructs or sharpens political identity, while at the same time adapting to existing country-specific confines such as values and norms.

To answer the research problem, "What Role Does Media Entertainment Play in Emerging Adults' Political Identity and Engagement Across Cultures?" Schneider and colleagues use qualitative interviews from Germany, Croatia, Turkey, South Korea, and the Philippines to explore the commonalities and differences in emerging adults' media diets with a special focus on media entertainment and political engagement. The authors study the link between entertainment consumption and political identity/engagement (e.g., Schneider, Bartsch, & Leonhard, 2021) based on new forms of entertainment experiences (e.g., moving, meaningful, self-transcendent, or inspiring). Across countries, *meaningful* media entertainment facilitates political identity exploration and commitment, even in politically disengaged individuals. However, perceived political freedom and democracy seem to influence this link: In *tighter* countries with lower degrees of democracy, the path from media entertainment to political identity appears to be stonier. Interviewees tend to be especially alert to the influences of political structures in such contexts (for a similar finding, see Gagrčin and Porten-Cheé's contribution).

In "Political Engagement Through Visual Mediation: The Visuality of the Christchurch Attack and a Cross-Governmental Analysis of Performative Populist Responses," Balca Arda studies the role of visual media communication in political engagement. She does this in the context of the Christchurch shootings by comparing the responses as well as very distinct framings of the shootings by two populist leaders: Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Employing multimodal discourse analysis of the visuality of political responses and a comparative approach, Arda shows how the communicative framing of the shootings can mobilize direct communication between politicians and followers, personalized communication, and authenticity in Ardern's case (through the #headscarfforharmony campaign), and conventional forms of political participation such as rallying and voting in Erdoğan's case (through offline participation at election rallies). The study makes visible how the framing of the attack is embedded in very distinct profiles of political culture and governing, generating different kinds of techniques in favor of society- and government-specific interpretations of the attacks.

Cross-Cultural Studies on the Role of Social-Psychological Factors in Political Engagement

In her article, "Media Use and Green Lifestyle Politics in Diverse Cultural Contexts of Postmaterialist Orientation and Generalized Trust: Findings From a Multilevel Analysis," Laura Leissner explores the moderating roles of cultural variables at the country level in relationships between mass media use, social media, and political participation. Leissner tests these relationships in the domain of green lifestyle politics (e.g., sustainable consumption practices) by employing a multilevel analysis of data from 28 European countries. Two cultural factors derived from cross-cultural frameworks are of primary concern: postmaterialist orientation emphasizing individual freedom and quality of life, and generalized trust indicating the belief that others can be trusted. Results show that traditional mass media use is directly conducive to green lifestyles, independent of such contextual variables. Associations between social media use and green lifestyle, by contrast, hinge on contextual variables: The positive association between social media use and green lifestyle political participation is strengthened only in countries with a postmaterialistic orientation and high levels of trust. The findings indicate that contexts seem to create opportunity structures that through media use may foster political lifestyles.

Emilija Gagrčin and Pablo Porten-Cheé illuminate—in their article, "Between Individual and Collective Social Effort: Vocabularies of Informed Citizenship in Different Information Environments," the contextually shaped understanding of informed citizenship and its practice in Germany and Serbia using semistructured interviews. Applying inductive and deductive data analysis procedures for each country, they find that, in the German sample, information disorder is perceived as a localized phenomenon and associated with the political far right. On the contrary, in the Serbian sample, information disorder is experienced as centralized (i.e., the national government spreads disinformation to discredit the opposition). Gagrčin and Porten-Cheé advance a social ontological conceptualization of informed citizenship as a relational and collective process of citizens managing information disorder. Counter to the idea that social media would homogenize experiences and ideas of citizenship, however, this study implies that national media systems and respective cultures of news consumption provide relevant contexts for thinking about citizenship norms in digital environments. The comparative nature of the study underscores such contextually influenced differences and similarities in the understanding and practice of informed citizenship and has implications for the development of political engagement in democracies with both lasting and brief traditions.

Arant and associates' contribution, "The Role of Media Use in Political Mobilization: A Comparison of Free and Restrictive Countries," presents their mixed-methods study on the link between media use and online/offline collective action comparing free countries with restrictive countries, indicated by their Global Freedom Score. The authors claim that efficacy perceptions are bound to differ depending on the political system of a country: higher in countries with stronger degrees of civil liberties and lower in countries where basic human and institutional rights are violated. As a corollary, using *offline* media for political purposes is more likely to lead to collective action intentions in free than in restrictive countries. *Online* media use and political participation, offering alternative and safer spaces for participation, by contrast, are more likely to lead to future collective action in restrictive countries. Using quantitative and qualitative survey data collected from 310 participants across 25 countries, Arant and colleagues empirically show the presumed relationships, differing across contexts. Qualitative data complement their findings by showing that much of the power of online media in restrictive societies rests on their potential to "spread the word of injustice" (participant) and ignite solidarity.

Conclusion

Our Special Section on cross-cultural approaches to the link between media use and political engagement has brought together a colorful group of researchers with a focus on a broad range of geographic regions, using various methods. This pluralism helped accomplish our main aim: to highlight multiple ways in which cross-cultural comparisons are possible and fruitful for explaining and understanding political engagement through media use.

Methods ranged from primary and secondary analyses of survey data to qualitative interviewing, content and discourse analysis, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches. Although quantitative approaches are common in the literature on cross-culturally comparative research, cross-cultural qualitative and mixed-methods analyses are rare (for exceptions, see Boczkowski et al., 2021; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2022). One reason might be that many textbooks on empirical cross-cultural comparisons teach mostly quantitative methodology and provide detailed guidance for sampling, collecting,

and analyzing data along with precise suggestions on invariance caveats (e.g., Smith et al., 2014). Qualitative researchers, by contrast, are often bound to develop their own strategies for cross-cultural comparisons using qualitative methodology. We are therefore pleased to provide examples for qualitative studies with a cross-cultural perspective. We would like to add that qualitative methodology, in our view, lends itself very well to cross-cultural comparisons, as many core qualitative strategies of data analysis are inherently comparative per definition (e.g., *constant comparison method;* Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000).

This Special Section has also covered an impressive geographic variety, including countries that have appeared infrequently in the literature, including Brazil, China, Chile, Croatia, Germany, New Zealand, Serbia, South Korea, The Philippines, Turkey, and many more (e.g., the 38 countries in Sang et al.'s contribution and the 28 European countries in Leissner's contribution). It represented a large variety of countries beyond the Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) ones and thus broadened the existing scope of knowledge (for a discussion of WEIRD, see Odağ, Uluğ, Kanık, & Maganić, 2022). This geographic reach was facilitated by international research networks, underlining the advantages of international research collaborations when carrying out cross-culturally comparative research.

The variety of countries included in this Special Section also facilitated comparisons across varied democratic traditions (full, flawed, hybrid, authoritarian), proposing structural political forces affecting the link between media use and political engagement. The contributions show how online media use can be a viable source of political engagement and collective action, especially in countries with limited civil liberties (Sang et al. and Arant et al.), and countries with briefer democratic histories (Gagrčin & Porten-Cheé), especially those embracing postmaterialistic values (Leissner), provided that political leaders invite personalized political engagement (Arda). We thus contend that comparisons across different levels of democracy are relevant for recognizing and anticipating patterns of disruptive behavior and democratically troubling behavior in full, flawed, and hybrid democracies and authoritarian regimes.

In addition, we see a profound variety of avenues for civil and political engagement across contributions including highly creative means of engagement, for example, through fandom (Huang et al.) or entertainment (Schneider et al.), a variety that is owed to context-specific differences in the understanding and practice of political engagement. This compelling heterogeneity of engagements rests on an equally compelling heterogeneity of media such as podcasts, social media, visual media, fan sites, and entertainment media, underlining the importance of nonconventional means of political engagement—tying in with existing research on participatory and digitally networked activities and personalized communication (Park et al., 2009).

In line with this existing research, our Special Section presents a universal narrative, a trend toward civic engagement in social life rather than direct political engagement through traditional political engagements (e.g., Dahlgren, 2005). The contributions show convincingly how political engagement is facilitated globally with unconventional political communication practices. *However, these practices are still experienced, interpreted, and shaped locally*. The global decline of civic and political engagement, especially among younger generations (Bessant et al., 2016; Kitanova, 2020), is counteracted through mediated outlets for political engagement and digital citizenship, including entertainment, fandom, visual

participation, and social media as catalysts of efficacy and social identity. *At the same time, these processes are contingent on features of the environment in which they occur*, including macro-level culture (such as repression, tightness, postmaterialism), the meso-level digital environment (media systems, platforms, affordances), and micro-level perceptions (such as efficacy, social identity, trust, and consumption cultures). To understand the link between media use and political participation, therefore, we need to study norms of digital citizenship not only on the aggregate (e.g., national) level but instead try to understand how they are socially embedded by studying them across various contexts related to media (e.g., Gagrčin, Porten-Cheé, Leissner, Emmer, & Jørring, 2022). These contextually, technologically, and socially embedded approaches help us understand not only the meaning of contextualized political engagement but also how it emerges and how it is reinforced.

To conclude, existing theories of cultural difference are highly viable means of studying the global universality versus locality of the link between media use and political engagement (e.g., Kim & Eom, 2019; Odağ, 2021; Odağ & Hanke, 2019). The studies assembled in this Special Section show that political engagement through using media hinges on cultural parameters such as political structures, political leaders, press freedom, neo-tribes, degrees of tightness, postmaterialist values, norms, and localized versus centralized patterns of information disorder, to mention only a few. We hope that future work extends this cross-cultural research trend and provides more syntheses of the large variety of contextual factors that we have shown in this Special Section to affect the link between media use and political engagement.

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