



Mobile communication and cross-cutting discussion: A cross-national study of South Korea and the US



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how distinct uses of mobile telephony are associated with one of the key elements in deliberative democracy from a cross-national and cross-cultural perspective. Specifically, we investigate the process in which the dynamic interplay between mobile phone uses for social relations and information is linked to an individual's engagement in open dialogue with non-likeminded people (i.e., cross-cutting discussion). In addition, we assess the extent to which cultures shape the implications of mobile communication for deliberative democracy while drawing on two independent surveys of adults in the US and South Korea. In brief, we show that the proper recipe of mobile phone use is linked to an enhanced deliberative democracy with a noteworthy qualification that the role of mobile communication may depend on unique cultural characteristics.

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1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of mixed findings regarding the civic role of new media, the literature has shifted attention to *how* one uses a given medium, rather than *how much*, while emphasizing that different practices can produce distinctive consequences (Campbell and Kwak, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Shah et al., 2001). Nevertheless, there has been a dearth of scholarly attention on how different patterns of new media use work in coordination with one another to shape the prospect of a healthy democratic society. This need for understanding of collaborative workings among usage patterns is particularly germane to mobile communication, considering smartphones support a number of motivations, goals, and needs that can be weaved into daily life activities. While the interactive consequences of usage patterns is not prevalent in the literature, a recent study (Lee et al., 2014) documented that distinct mobile usage patterns work together to explain enhanced political participation.

The current study attends to a similar interactive approach to assess collective workings of distinct mobile practices, while also addressing notable limitations in the extant research. First, although a prior work (Lee et al., 2014) showed the constructive joint workings of mobile uses in predicting political participation, the highly publicized democracy dilemma (Mutz, 2006) implies that mobile communication may entail inconsistent results in terms of the two building blocks of

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democracy, namely participation (i.e., active engagement in political activities) and deliberation (i.e., frequent discussion with non-likeminded people). An array of studies have highlighted the substantial contribution of technology to political mobilization (Campbell and Kwak, 2010, 2011b; Kwak et al., 2011; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009). However, the focal property of mobile devices as private communication tools still raises the concern that intensive contact within a constrained mobile network may thwart users' broader connections with diverse people (Gergen, 2008; Habuchi, 2005; Ling, 2008). Hence, additional research efforts should probe into the association between the dynamic interplay among distinct mobile uses and one's involvement in a pluralistic and deliberative society.

Furthermore, few studies have approached the civic role of mobile telephony from a cross-national and cross-cultural stance. Nonetheless, prior works have uncovered that disparate cultural characteristics can exert considerable influence not only on how people use mobile phones but also on how they construe social reality portrayed through their devices (Baron and Segerstad, 2010; Campbell, 2007a,b). In addition, research has shown that the social effects of new media can largely depend on unique cultural standards of individual countries (Chau et al., 2002; Kim et al., 2011). Collectively these studies warrant a fresh venture to explore differing implications of mobile communications for the health of a pluralistic society in diverse cultural contexts.

To fill these gaps, the present study takes particular interest in the two most prominent user practices in this new media environment identified in previous studies (Boulianne, 2009; Hughes et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2014; Wilken, 2011)—*relational* use to manage close tie networks and *informational* use to gather and discuss content about news and public affairs. Specifically, we investigate the process in which the dynamic interplay of these two mobile usage patterns is linked to an individual's engagement in open dialogue with non-likeminded people (i.e., cross-cutting discussion). In addition, we assess the extent to which cultures shape the implications of mobile communication for deliberative democracy while drawing on two independent surveys of adults in the US and South Korea (Korea hereafter). The selected countries stand out as leaders of mobile communications (Google, 2013) as well as democracy (The Economist, 2013), and they represent two prototypical cultural norms of individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). Therefore, comparing these two countries provides an ideal case study to assess how cultures configure the relationship between mobile phone use and deliberation. In brief, we seek to show that the proper recipe of mobile phone use is linked to an enhanced deliberative democracy with a noteworthy qualification that the role of mobile communication may depend on unique cultural characteristics.

2. Literature review

2.1. The role mobile of communication in the public sphere

Given that the mobile phone is more often than not regarded as a communication resource within a private network, its role in the public realm had been largely ignored. While drawing on the zero-sum notion, theorists (e.g., Gergen, 2008) have expressed the concern that extensive use of mobile phones may come at the expense of involvement in the public realm of civic and social life as these mobile technologies tend to confine people's interests to their private spheres. However, in the wake of recent protests that have attested to the mounting capacity of mobile communication to alter the social and political landscape (Neumayer and Stald, 2014; Yun and Chang, 2011), the potential of mobile telephony to help revitalize a healthy democratic society has gradually garnered a good deal of scholarly attention. Indeed, studies have recently attended to the noteworthy role of mobile communication in engaging citizens in various aspects of public life (Campbell and Kwak, 2010; Kwak et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2014).

Despite this constructive role of mobile phone use for political mobilization, the highly publicized democracy dilemma (Mutz, 2006) suggests that mobile communications may entail contrasting repercussions for the building blocks of democracy, namely participation (i.e., active engagement in political activities) and deliberation (i.e., frequent discussion with non-likeminded people). Moreover, the focal property of mobile devices as private communication tools raises the concern that intensive contact within a constrained mobile network may thwart users' broader connections with diverse people. Notions such as "bounded solidarity" (Ling, 2008, p. 176), "telecoons" (Habuchi, 2005, p. 179), and "monadic clusters" (Gergen, 2008, p. 302) point to a similar concern that repeated mobile contact with a few close associates could overly solidify shared norms and mutual interests, consequently giving rise to an insular network of likeminded individuals. This form of mobile-mediated rigid network could then pose a threat to the process of open dialogue, which constitutes a key element of a functioning civil society.

Although a strand of research has shown that mobile communication adds mainly to the consolidation of core network ties (Ling, 2008; Ling et al., 2012; Palackal et al., 2011), only limited evidence (e.g., Kobayashi and Boase, 2014) exists documenting that these tightly configured networks do take away interactions with dissimilar others or lead to the erosion of open deliberation. In fact, a handful of studies have underscored the potential benefits of mobile communication for open dialogue (Campbell and Kwak, 2012), diverse interactions (Campbell and Kwak, 2011a), and diffuse networks (Igarashi et al., 2005). Thus, implications of mobile phone use for an individual's engagement in open deliberation are in need of further explication. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the link between mobile phone uses and discussion with non-likeminded people (i.e., cross-cutting discussion), which scholars (e.g., Mutz, 2006) see as a critical element of a pluralistic and deliberative society.

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