Mobile communication and political participation in South Korea: Examining the intersections between informational and relational uses

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study aims to extend the literature on mobile communication by demonstrating that multifaceted mobile practices work in coordination with one another to predict enhanced engagement in public life. Using a national survey of adults in South Korea, we show that informational mobile phone use to gather and discuss content about news and public affairs is positively associated with political participation while the corresponding link for relational mobile phone use to enhance strong personal tie relationships being also significant. More importantly, the findings indicate that the two mobile usage patterns interact with each other to explain increased involvement in political activities. However, analysis of the three-way interaction points to a noteworthy caveat, namely that those who are already engaged, by virtue of their perceived capacity to produce desired outcomes in politics (i.e., self-efficacy), are even more likely to obtain motivational benefits from the manifold uses of mobile telephony.

1. Introduction

A fresh stream of research has aptly highlighted that different forms of mobile phone use can yield distinctive implications for public discourse (Campbell & Kwak, 2010, 2011b; Kwak, Campbell, Choi, & Bae, 2011). The central tenet underlying this approach states that the role of mobile communication in the public realm is highly dependent upon the specific ways in which people use the technology. So far, this line of research has treated individual usage patterns separately, with a special emphasis on the contrasting effects compared to one another. Meanwhile, the growing proliferation of the smartphone makes it very unlikely that users adopt the technology exclusively for one restricted purpose; hence an individual usage pattern is less likely to operate in isolation. Nevertheless, it is left unexamined how different modes of mobile phone use function in coordination with one another to influence citizen's attitudes and behavior.

Motivated by a similar concern, recent studies on traditional media called for a closer investigation of the interactive effects that distinct media uses can jointly produce (Balmas, 2014; Hmielowski, 2012; Holbert & Benoit, 2009). The basic premise

inherent in this framework acknowledges that a specific media use is less likely to occur in a vacuum; thus the influence of an individual use cannot be studied apart from others. Indeed, empirical evidence underpins the proposition, illuminating that various forms of media use work in tandem to affect people's attitudes and behavior. Extending this line of inquiry to mobile research warrants additional efforts to explore the ways that particular usage patterns of mobile telephony work in coordination with one another to shape citizen's public engagement. To this end, the present study takes a particular interest in the interplay between two main practices of mobile telephony: *relational* use to maintain strong personal tie relationships and *informational* use to gather and discuss content about news and public affairs.

South Korea provides an ideal case for studying the public consequences of multifaceted mobile communication. On the technological front, South Korea is one of the leading states of mobile industry, with subscriptions actually exceeding the population size (Korea Communications Commissions, 2011), the mobile broadband usage rate above 90 percent (International Telecommunication Union, 2011), and the smartphone penetration rate estimated to have reached nearly 80 percent in 2012 (Korea Internet, 2012). On the public front, South Korea is ranked as the most developed democracy in Asia by the democracy index in 2012 (The Economist, 2012). Moreover, some point to the significant contributions of mobile communication to the health of democracy in South Korea, such that it triggered mass-scale

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public participation in the candlelight protests in 2008 (Ok, 2011) and spurred a higher voter turnout among young citizens in the 2010 local elections (Kim, 2010). As such, understanding the civic role of mobile telephony in South Korea may provide compelling directions for other countries where mobile telephony is widely being diffused, while their democracies are yet to be full-blown. The mix of these ingredients comprises a useful recipe for examining mobile communication's implications for political life in a democratically advanced society. Thus, using a national survey of adults in South Korea, the present study assesses how the dynamic interplay of different mobile usage patterns is tied to citizen engagement in public matters.

2. Literature review

2.1. Mobile communication in South Korea

In South Korea, mobile phones have quickly emerged as "the center of our lives" as the nation's leading mobile carrier, SK Telecom, advertises. Statistics show that Koreans spend the largest amount of time of any country on their mobile phones, with an average of 126 minutes per day. This is followed by US citizens (McKinsey, 2011). They also stand out for their diversity of use. In addition to talking and texting, Koreans report high levels of mobile use for social networking sites, games, music, browsing websites, using search engines, and watching videos. Even at a casual glance, the ubiquity of mobile communication in everyday life of Koreans should be readily evident; in a restaurant or a café, most people place their phone on the table to check it regularly and many hold the phone in their a hand while they are walking or standing (Jouhki, 2009). In fact, mobile devices in South Korea are typically called "handphone" implying that people tend to treat their phone as an inseparable attachment to their body, and thus leaving their phone at home may produce considerable feeling of discomfort (Kim, 2010).

There are several factors inherent in Korean society that could account for people's passion for mobile communication. First, urban concentration of the population has contributed to the spread of mobile phones. With about 83 percent of the population living in urban areas as of 2011 (The World Bank, 2011), the density of urban residence is often thought to accelerate the rapid penetration of new communication technologies (Ok, 2011). It also means that Koreans spend a significant amount time commuting and waiting, which can be devoted to mobile communication. Indeed, research indicates that Korean users frequently mention the subway as an ideal place for using the mobile phone (Jouhki, 2009). Second, Hangul, Korean alphabet, is highly suitable for the text input system of the mobile phone. Hangul consists of 14 consonants and 10 vowels. Any vowel letters can be made with a quick combination of bars and dots, and the primary consonants can be changed to more complex forms with ease. This structure is complemented with a notably simpler mobile keypad, which includes only about 10 characters, bolstering the ease of typing. The advantage of the unique writing system is said to have fueled the popularity of mobile communication in South Korea (Kim, 2010). Lastly, the high level of mobile communication is attributable to the collectivistic culture of South Korea. As Goggin (2006) notes, the mobile phone "has become a central cultural technology in its own right" (p. 2). Particularly under collectivistic traditions of Korea putting more emphasis on in-group cohesiveness (Bstieler & Hemmert, 2008; Cho, Mallinckrodt, & Yune, 2010; Hur & Hur, 2004), mobile telephony has been regarded as a pivotal tool with which people maintain social relationships (Hong, 2002; Jouhki, 2009; Kim, 2010).

The significant role of mobile telephony in the private sphere of social relations can translate into tangible consequences in the realm of public life. For example, Ok (2011) points out that mobile communication among peers served as an important catalyst for public participation during a series of candlelight protests against Korean beef imports from the US in 2008. This was especially evident among young citizens. The 'always on, always accessible' features of the mobile telephony device enabled them to coordinate and publicize large-scale group actions, as well as broadcast events in real time (Ok, 2011). The influence of mobile communication on public matters became even more apparent when in 2010, young voters who were overwhelmed by the exit poll results, urged their friends to turn out to vote for the challenging party. It has been suggested that this changed the result of the election (Kim, 2010). These factors are helping to expedite the adoption of mobile voting in primary elections in South Korea (Yonhap News, 2012). In this way, personal uses of mobile communication in South Korea intersect with their implications for the realm of public engagement.

2.2. Patterns of mobile phone use in a pluralistic society

With simultaneous increases in selectivity and availability, two key factors shaping the nature of a communication network (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995), the emerging information environment seems to provide paradoxical implications for the prospect of a pluralistic society. First, proponents attend to the greater availability of non-overlapping ideas, which should encourage a burgeoning exchange of dissimilar viewpoints (Dahlberg, 2001; Stromer-Galley, 2003). Conversely, critics argue that a high degree of user selectivity jeopardizes the public sphere to the extent that it creates echo chambers of analogous perspectives (Galston, 2002; Sunstein, 2001). Against the backdrop of contradictory predictions, a fresh stream of research demonstrates that despite the tendency to selectively tune in opinion-reinforcing messages, individuals do come across attitude-discrepant information through new media (Brundidge, 2010; Garrett, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009).

Perhaps the debate can be further reconciled when we consider social ties of differing strengths (Granovetter, 1973). That is, the multifaceted landscape of the digital world may produce non-monolithic communication experiences inside and outside a strong tie network (Haythornthwaite, 2002). On one hand, certain features with which users exercise a high degree of social selectivity (e.g., texting and voice calling) tend to intensify the internal exchanges of similar ideas within a close tie network without much broadening the range of external connection (Haythornthwaite, 2005). However, some electronic activities are less subject to the selectivity aspect. As Mutz and Martin (2001) conclude, although selectivity plays a significant role in homogenizing interpersonal associations, people's capacity and inclination to conduct effortful selection is relatively weak when they consume news media content, thereby opening up opportunities to encounter alternative viewpoints. Applying this logic to the emerging digital landscape should suggest that there are types of online behaviors that are less governed by selectivity and would be more enriched by content availability (e.g., using news sites, portals, and online forums). These informational practices online can foster broader exposure to heterogeneous beliefs and values (Brundidge, 2010; Kim, 2011), which are experienced chiefly outside a primary network of social relations (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

In accordance with these considerations, we focus on two main practices of mobile telephony that may entail distinctive ramifications for the public sphere: relational use to enhance strong personal tie relationships, which serves to solidify existing social