



# Mobile use, personal values, and connectedness with civic life



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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine whether and how mobile communication enables citizens to translate their value orientations into their connectedness to the civic life. Specifically, we probe the indirect process in which different types of personal values predict key dimensions of engagement with civic affairs through patterns of mobile phone use. We show that individualism is indirectly associated with engagement with civic affairs through informational mobile use, whereas the link between collectivism and community involvement is positively intervened by relational mobile use. Additionally, socio-tropic empathy yields indirect relationships with civic engagement through informational mobile use. Implications of these findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Mobile communication has the potential to facilitate people's engagement in civic life. The anytime, anywhere nature of the technology allows users to seamlessly weave network interactions into the fabric of their everyday lives, to the extent that "perpetual contact" (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) with peers and family members can be achieved. To be sure, social connection among core ties is one of the defining characteristics of mobile communication (Ling, 2008). However, for some users, heightened levels of network connectivity may mean being isolated within their close contacts, unable to engage outside of the private sphere of social relations (Gergen, 2008). There has been an increase in scholarly attention toward whether and how intensive mobile contact among close ties can lead to a type of insularity where one is highly connected at the network level, but less engaged in civic life (Campbell & Kwak, 2010; Lee, Kwak, Campbell, & Ling, 2014). Despite the theoretical

concern above, these studies consistently showed that mobile telephony could encourage citizen engagement in civic and social matters.

Our interest in this study is grounded in prior works that examined the link between individual value orientation and social media use (Chau, Cole, Massey, Montoya-Weiss, & O'Keefe, 2002; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Skoric & Park, 2014) and a related line of research that attended to mobile communication's effectiveness in the civic realm of social life (Lee et al., 2014). There has been only limited research on whether and how specific personal value orientations are tied to people's engagement with civic matters in the public sphere (Allik & Realo, 2004; Yoon, 2010). We anticipate that taking into account the role of mobile communication can help us understand how particular personal values play into individuals' action on civic matters. Within this framework, mobile communication can emerge as a distinctive medium that plays a critical role in enabling citizens to translate their specific value orientations into their connectedness to the civic realm of social life. Thus, this study advances the existing work in this area by accounting for the ways in which different types of personal values (individualism, collectivism, and

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socio-tropic empathy) predict key dimensions of engagement with civic affairs (community involvement and support for social cause) through prevailing patterns of mobile phone use (informational and relational uses).

### 1.1. Personal value orientations and connectedness with civic life

Individuals' value orientations play a powerful role in shaping the ways people view and experience social life. In particular, the constructs of individualism and collectivism have garnered much attention in social psychology because they guide how people reason, understand the self, and relate to others (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Skoric & Park, 2014; Triandis, 2001). Individualism refers to an orientation to the personal self, characterized by qualities such as self-reliance, competition, and personal goals and achievements. Collectivists tend to have a "we" orientation with core ties and family members, valuing interdependence, mutual obligation, and integrity within social groups. Given that these types of value orientations are at the core of how and how much individuals prioritize the self, others, and society, they have the potential to help as well as hinder engagement in public matters.

The extant research shows that these types of value orientations predispose people toward certain tendencies in their engagement and relations with others. In individualistic cultures, people tend to give priority to personal rights over social duties and place a greater emphasis on self-autonomy than group membership (Hofstede, 2001). As such, it has been argued that individualists are rather unresponsive to the common good and civic order in a society and often detach themselves from civic engagement in matters of public interest (Sampson, 1977). In contrast, collectivism usually prioritizes groups over self and often obligates individuals to align their own goals to those of a society (Oyserman et al., 2002). Hence, people in collectivistic cultures have been hypothesized to be more interested in and more enthusiastic about their engagement in the broader realm of social life (Yoon, 2010).

Despite the theoretical merit of the reasoning above, it remains largely unclear how individualism and collectivism play into differing levels of social engagement. In fact, studies have shown that individualistic value orientation may prove a boon to people's engagement in a broader realm of social life. For example, Allik and Realo (2004) found that individualistic values were associated with higher levels of civic engagement and political activity and also with larger numbers of voluntary associations and group memberships. On the contrary, Yoon (2010) noted that collectivism tends to have a negative impact on the behavioral aspect of civic culture and suppress people's involvement with actions in matters of public concerns. It can be reasoned that individualism predisposes citizens toward more dynamic engagement in civic life to the extent voluntary cooperation helps them achieve self-relevant goals (Yoon, 2010) and also to the extent this value orientation fosters greater willingness to interact with strangers (Oyserman et al., 2002) and more openness to new experiences (McCrae, 2001). Collectivists, with their focal interests rather narrowly confined within the

closest, in-group circle of social relationships, may remain less engaged in the broader social sphere that encompasses a sizable body of out-group members (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 2001).

These rather puzzling implications of individualism and collectivism for social engagement may reflect the fact that these two value orientations are not opposing sides of the same continuum in their understanding of common good and goals of a larger society. Perhaps, they operate separately by bringing salience to different issues (Campbell, 2008; Oyserman et al., 2002). At the same time, individualism and collectivism share something very fundamental in common. Each is a value system that places emphasis on orientations toward the personal sphere of social life in predicting attitudes and behavior. Individualism highlights orientations toward the personal self, while collectivism highlights orientations toward personal ties within connected social units (Oyserman et al., 2002). Together, these two frames offer a rather narrow view of personal value orientations in the sense that orientations toward larger society (i.e., unknown members of the public realm) are paid much less theoretical attention.

Here, we see an opportunity to broaden the traditional individualism-collectivism framework to better understand how fundamental orientations toward the public realm of social life also shape the ways in which people are socially engaged through media use. Thus, we add a third dimension to the individualism-collectivism value orientations framework, which we characterize as *socio-tropic empathy*. Socio-tropic empathy refers to one's intensity of concern for the welfare of unknown others in society at-large. By adding socio-tropic empathy to the mix, we expand the range of the individualism-collectivism value orientations framework to account for how individuals prioritize the welfare of broader society, as well as the personal self and in-group others. While there may be insufficient literature to frame a hypothesis about this value orientation, there are theoretical grounds for anticipating it serves as a foundation for being socially engaged, especially at levels of society that lie outside the realms of the self and personal relationships (see Batson, 2010; Dawes, Van De Kragt, & Orbell, 1988).

### 1.2. Personal value orientations and patterns of mobile phone use

Despite the abundance of scholarly attention to various mobile phone usage patterns and their unique ramifications (Campbell & Kwak, 2010; Lee & Kwak, 2016), there is a dearth of research on how individuals' value orientations can entail discrete forms of mobile phone use. We aim to fill this gap by linking personal value orientations to specific uses of mobile telephony. The present study takes a special interest in two prominent user practices in mobile communication—*relational* use to manage close tie networks and *informational* use to gather and discuss content about news (Lee & Kwak, 2016; Wilken, 2011). The ensuing literature should highlight how distinctive personal values lead to particular forms of mobile communication.

A wealth of scholarly work suggests that distinctive value orientations entail peculiar applications and

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