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Table of Contents

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Editorial

Contentious Politics in a Digital World: Studies on Social Activism, Protest, and Polarization

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Abstract
In a world of polarized societies and radical voices hogging the public digital sphere, this thematic issue aims at identifying the different strategies of old and new social movements in the extremes of the political debates by focusing on the interplay between polarization, uses of the internet, and social activism. In order to disentangle these interactions, this thematic issue covers a wide range of political settings across the globe. It does so by studying: (a) how opposing activists discuss politics online and its implications for democratic theory; (b) how social media uses and online discussions foster offline protests; (c) how the media and state-led-propaganda frame disruptive and anti-government offline protests and how this situation contributes to polarization in both democratic and non-democratic regimes; and finally (d) how civil society uses digital tools to organize and mobilize around sensitive issues in non-democratic regimes.

Keywords
digital activism; digital mobilization; political polarization; political protest; social media

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Protesting While Polarized: Digital Activism in Contentious Times" edited by Homero Gil de Zúñiga (University of Salamanca/Pennsylvania State University/Universidad Diego Portales), Isabel Inguanzo (University of Salamanca), and Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu (Universidad de La Laguna).

1. Introduction

Social movements use the internet mainly for three purposes: mobilizing social support, managing their network, and creating public spaces for deliberation (Mosca & Della Porta, 2009). Indeed, today, a great deal of activism takes place online. In terms of digital protest, there is an extensive variety of repertoires both individuals and collective actors can follow: from very conventional forms of activism, such as signing an online petition, to a whole new way of disruptive online politics, including *jamming* or *hacktivism*. All of these repertoires differ on the threshold imposed to engage in political action, with certain behaviors entailing more cost than others. They also vary in the way the internet is used: whether they are virtual in essence—like email bombing—or they are facilitated through the internet—such as donating money to a campaign or political group donation (Bachmann & de Zúñiga, 2013; van Laer & van Aelst, 2010). Moreover, the internet has also allowed for the transnationalization of advocacy campaigns through the connection of epistemic communities (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). These advocacy networks aim at creating broad consensus over certain issues by using cognitive frames that could easily and widely resonate around the globe (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005).

2. Social Movements, Cultural Backlash, and the Internet

As a product of these advocacy campaigns, various concerns, such as human and civil rights, environmental protection, gender equality, economic redistribution, public health, individual freedoms, or migration, have all entered the public and political agenda through the action and persuasion of social movements and certain political parties. These concerns have nonetheless been challenged by other radically opposed individuals, parties, and groups, as a result of cultural backlash (Norris & Inglehart, 2018).

The result of these competing processes is an increased polarization both between parties and among the electorate (Layman et al., 2006). Regarding civil society, we are increasingly seeing the mutual challenge of movements and counter-movements along ideological lines (Hager et al., 2021; Vüllers & Hellmeier, 2022). The reasons behind this increasing polarization are multiple and go beyond the scope of this thematic issue. However, the literature has stressed one that is of particular relevance for this issue: the role of citizen interest groups and activists throughout the digital sphere (Williamson et al., 2011).

Recent studies show that radical activists on both sides of a divisive issue are more frequently engaging in internet political discussions, and creating their own online content (Idoiaga Mondragon et al., 2019; Inguanzo et al., 2021). However, the fact that radical activists are more present in online political discussions does not mean they are talking to one another. In fact, filter bubbles and echo chambers are also common, as they increase polarization and jeopardize democratic deliberation (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga & Chen, 2019).

3. Main Contribution to the Literature With this Thematic Issue

In light of these dynamics, where a polarized political scenario and radical voices hog the public digital sphere, this thematic issue aims at identifying the different strategies of old and new social movements in the extremes of the political debates. More specifically, this thematic issue focuses on the interplay between polarization, uses of the internet, and social activism. So far, previous literature has explored the relationships between either: (a) polarization and activism, (b) social media and protest, or (c) polarization and uses of the internet. However, more empirical studies on diverse political settings are needed to understand the interactions between these three interconnected processes. This thematic issue is tasked with eliminating this gap in the literature.

In that regard, we contribute to the literature by providing answers to the following fundamental questions: How do polarized discussions influence online and offline protest? How radicals from different ideological extremes, on a wide variety of issues, are using digital means to support offline protest? Can digital resources/infrastructure lower thresholds for collective action in a polarized era?

In order to answer these questions, this thematic issue covers various political settings including North America, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, East Asia, and South East Asia. It does so by studying four main dimensions of the topic of interest: (a) how opposing activists discuss politics online and its implications for democratic theory; (b) how social media uses and online discussions foster offline protests; (c) how the media and state-led-propaganda frame disruptive and anti-government offline protests and how this contributes to polarization both in both democratic and non-democratic regimes; and finally (d) how civil society uses digital tools to organize and mobilize around sensitive issues in non-democratic regimes.

4. Summaries of Studies Included in this Thematic Issue

Josephine Lukito, Zhe Cui, An Hu, Taeyoung Lee, and João V. S. Ozawa (2022) open this thematic issue by exploring whether some states use and aggravate political polarization to their advantage. Using a combination of quantitative data from different sources, the authors study governments' responses to pro-democracy and pro-independence protesters in young and non-democracies in East and Southeast Asia. They find a temporal relationship between domestically targeted propaganda and state violence: (Some) states tend to first discredit protesters before eventually moving to violence to put down the protests. In serving their propaganda efforts, governments often articulate an "us versus them" polarizing discourse, where the government is framed as good (democratic) and the protesters as unacceptable (rioters, insurgents, or terrorists).

The delegitimization of political protest is not a phenomenon exclusive to non-democracies or Asian countries. Valentina Proust and Magdalena Saldaña (2022) describe the media framing of Chile's *Estallido Social*, a massive "protest process" that sparked throughout the country in October 2019 and lasted over two months. While the movement was predominantly peaceful and called for social justice, the news stories framed protesters as "deviant" and "violent" without paying much attention to their motivations and demands. More relevant to communication theory, the study also addresses the call for more integration of framing typologies (Kozman, 2017) by examining the pattern of associations between generic (e.g., "attribution of responsibility" or "conflict") and specific frames (e.g., "riot," "confrontation," or "spectacle").

Shelley Boulianne and Sangwon Lee (2022) sign the third article in this monograph, which offers valuable insight into the reasons why people of different

ideologies engage in protest participation. Building on the theory of emerging technology, Boulianne and Lee use survey data from four established democracies—the US, the UK, France, and Canada—to observe the role of social media use, exposure to misinformation, and conspiracy beliefs in explaining protest. The study does not only align with previous research indicating a strong association between social media use and protest, but it also provides a more granular understanding of the differential effects of emerging (e.g., Twitch) and legacy social media (e.g., Facebook) on left-wing and right-wing protest. Thus, the analysis suggests that exposure to misinformation fuels protest activity among those on the ideological left, while conspiracy beliefs increase protest participation among those on the right.

The monograph delves deeper into the dynamics of right-wing activism with a piece by Viktor Chagas, Rodrigo Carreiro, Nina Santos, and Guilherme Popolin (2022). The study focuses on the Brazilian case and the "hashtag wars" that took place on Twitter between supporters and opponents of the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro. Worryingly enough, their data suggest that far-right digital activists (Bolsonarists) have better leveraged the affordances of Twitter to promote their message and persuade audiences. Compared to anti-Bolsonarist hashtags, Bolsonarist ones grow faster, reach higher circulation, remain in evidence for a longer time, and engage more influential users. Pro-Bolsonaro Twitter activists seem to be more coordinated and "true to the cause," which may help normalize an anti-democratic agenda in the country.

Azi Lev-On (2022) brings us a qualitative, netnographic study of online activism in support of Roman Zadorov, a maintenance man accused of a violent crime in Israel and perceived as innocent by the public. Lev-On uses this case study to illustrate how online activist groups are easy to establish, but also naturally unstable and prone to polarization and clustering. Group managers seem to have a major role in the formation of *deliberative* and *participative* clusters of activists and groups: deliberative managers privilege quality (of the content and debate), while participative administrators focus on quantity (number of group members and diffusion of the message). These different conceptions induce important strategic and practical differences between the two clusters of activists.

Zixue Tai (2022) also adopts a netnographic approach to study the role of QQ instant messaging groups in catalyzing mass protests in China. While traditional media and formal organizations in that country tend to align with government interests, technology-enabled spaces such as QQ groups have created new opportunities for collective action. QQ-based "activist brokered networks" provide a relatively safe space to disseminate contentious information, organize conventional and unconventional participation tactics, and even mobilize collective support and increase group morale. Despite their semi-controlled (enclosed) character, these QQ groups seem to be commonly infiltrated by informants or surveilled by the authorities and, consequently, most participants are cautious in their interactions and stay away from taboo regions (e.g., anti-government rhetoric or subversive speech).

The mobilization potential of mobile instant messaging and social media is not always beneficial for democratic development, especially in highly polarized contexts. Online-based interactions that privilege homogeneous social ties (i.e., people like oneself) may be a source of political polarization and mobilization of the kind that considers the positions of the opponents as inherently wrong and illegitimate. Such an environment could hamper attempts to find negotiated solutions and compromise. This is what Andrés Scherman, Nicolle Etchegaray, Magdalena Browne, Diego Mazorra, and Hernando Rojas (2022) argue in the penultimate piece of this thematic issue. Their survey-based analysis uses data from two South American countries—Chile and Colombia—which experienced parallel episodes of widespread social discontent that translated into massive street protests and the weakening of their national governments in 2019.

Bingbing Zhang, Isabel Inguanzo, and Homero Gil de Zúñiga (2022) close this thematic issue with an exhaustive examination of the drivers of illegal protest participation (e.g., seizing buildings, confronting the police, etc.). Using two waves of US survey data, Zhang et al. found that online uncivil discussion has a core role in predicting unlawful protest, while other forms of online and face-to-face discussion are less important. Interestingly and somewhat counterintuitively, ideological extremity does not seem to impact illegal protest over time. The authors of this last piece draw attention to the potentially detrimental or "democratic backsliding" effects of online incivility on democracy.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

States vs. Social Movements: Protests and State Repression in Asia

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Abstract
This study considers how governments use state-sponsored propaganda and state violence in tandem to repress social movements and, in so doing, exacerbate polarization. We specifically focus on cases in young and non-democracies in East and Southeast Asia: China and Hong Kong, the Free Papua Movement in Indonesia, and Myanmar's more recent coup. Using a time series analysis, our analysis reveals a temporal relationship between state propaganda and violence; however, we do not find much evidence that these state actions Granger-cause social movement activities. The exception to this is in Myanmar, where we find that repressive state actions decrease activity in Facebook groups criticizing the Tatmadaw, which in turn increases offline protest activities.

Keywords
Asia; political repression; propaganda; protests; social movements

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Protesting While Polarized: Digital Activism in Contentious Times" edited by Homero Gil de Zúñiga (University of Salamanca / Pennsylvania State University / Diego Portales University), Isabel Inguanzo (University of Salamanca), and Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu (Universidad de La Laguna).

1. Introduction

Social movements and protest activities are essential mechanisms for democracy. Through protests, citizens can raise grievances, highlight political inequities, and seek a redress of their political woes. However, in Asia—and specifically in weak democracies or authoritarian countries—governments may try to delegitimize social movements using repressive tactics such as propaganda and violence.

While a substantial amount of scholarly attention has thus far focused on foreign-targeting state-sponsored propaganda (see Bastos & Farkas, 2019), less is known about domestically-targeted state propaganda, particularly in the Global South (Xia, 2021). This highlights a troubling gap in the literature: We know little about how these governments coordinate their repressive strategies and even less about the extent to which these tactics exacerbate political woes and conflicts against social movements.

Seeking to address this gap, this study explores state governments' use of state repression against protesting social movements and the polarizing consequences of these actions. We focus specifically on two forms of state repression: state-sponsored propaganda and state violence. Furthermore, our work reconsiders how polarization operates in non-democratic countries and circumstances. In doing so, our work highlights the importance of studying political communication phenomena in non-Western cases, particularly as it relates to protests and democratizing efforts.

Specifically, we consider three East and Southeast Asian states where the government uses propaganda and violence to repress protest activities: China, Indonesia, and Myanmar. We focus on this region because it is rife with efforts to change regimes, democratize, or secede. While governments and protesters have long been in conflict in Southeast Asia (Boudreau, 2004), digital media presents new opportunities for governments to delegitimize protest efforts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. State Governments and Social Movements in Southeast Asia

In this study, we examine the conflict between social movements and state governments through the perspective of polarization and asymmetric power. We define social movements as groups that seek to enact social change through non-institutional strategies (Tarrow, 2011), including communicative, collective, and connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Habermas, 1985). Social movements often challenge existing systems (or perceived systems) of political authority (Cross & Snow, 2011; Tilly, 2004) and are therefore in frequent conflict with local and national governments.

The social movements we focus on are grassroots movements that explicitly or implicitly desire to secede or change the state's regime. Regime change movements studied in this article are primarily pro-democracy, demanding a greater degree of autonomy from the primary state government (if not outright ousting of the current leadership); for example, the case of Hong Kong, while focused primarily on the 2019 extradition bill, was undergirded by the disagreements between the pro-democracy movement and Beijing (Holbig, 2020). These social movements utilize a variety of strategies in their pursuit of independence, including both violent and non-violent tactics (Griffiths, 2021). Of particular interest in this study is the use of non-violent protests, understood as a form of political resistance that garners both national and international attention (Hardiman, 2013).

While a growing body of scholarship has highlighted threats to established, Western democracies, such threats are more directly felt and observed in the Global South, in countries that are not democratic or have weak or young democratic institutions. In a weak democracy or autocratic system, state governments can further exploit multiple social apparatuses and tactics (Althusser, 2010) to "eliminate" their opposition. Thus, areas in the Global South, like East and Southeast Asia, are the true battlegrounds of democratic efforts (della Porta, 2020).

Historically, Asian countries have had a turbulent relationship with democratic efforts. Countries like Myanmar and Thailand, for example, oscillate between democratizing and militarized coups that quickly repress upset citizens (Kipgen, 2016). And even in democratic countries, elections populist leaders may dismantle democratic institutions to gain greater power (Case, 2017). Southeast Asian citizens are more likely to take an instrumentalist view of democracy, meaning that they measure the success of a democratic regime based on its ability to govern rather than an adherence to democratic ideals (Pietsch, 2015), suggesting that Southeast Asian countries may be prone to authoritarianism if it brings the promise of more effective leadership.

Despite these challenges, social movements persist across Asia, in democracies and autocracies. While some are ephemeral, emerging as a result of a large political change, many are longstanding and persist despite repeated attempts to silence activists. As digital media affords these movements new opportunities to garner global attention and support (Shen et al., 2020), counties have also had to develop new strategies for delegitimizing opposing activists and social movements.

2.2. Cases: East and Southeast Asia

Our analysis will focus on protests and state repression in three Asian countries. The first is the anti-extradition law amendment bill movement in Hong Kong. The second, in Indonesia, is the Free West Papua movement, which seeks to establish an independent West Papua nation. And finally, in Myanmar, we examine the protests surrounding the 2021 military coup, which saw the ousting of then-State Counsellor Aung Sang Suu Kyi following a democratic election.

These cases all share a similarity in that the governments used multiple strategies to repress ongoing protests. However, they also vary in both the structure and resilience of their political communication system. In terms of party structure, for example, China is a one-party system, Indonesia is a multi-party system, and Myanmar (prior to the coup) was a two-party system. The protests being studied also differed in what they wanted to achieve. We expect these variations to produce case-specific differences (Boudreau, 2004).

2.2.1. First Case: The 2019–2020 Hong Kong Protests

The 1997 Hong Kong handover ended the city's 150-year history as a British colony and transformed it into a special administrative region of China (Ching, 2009). At this time, Beijing articulated a "one country, two systems" policy which supposedly guaranteed that Hong Kong would retain some autonomous rule for 50 years (So, 2011). During the first decade, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) generally adhered to this policy (Lee & Chan, 2008). However, in 2012, the central government began to exert its control over Hong Kong when its Liaison Office explicitly supported and lobbied for the election of Leung Chun-Ying to chief executive, the highest office in Hong Kong. This action was widely condemned by Hong Kong citizens, sparking additional protests as more controlling policies were implemented, including the 2012 protests against "moral and national education" and the 2014 Umbrella Movement (Purbrick, 2019).

The distrust between China and Hong Kong reached a peak in 2019 when the Hong Kong government proposed the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill, which would allow transfers of fugitives from Hong Kong to Mainland China ("Tao fan tiao li," 2019). The proposal of this bill motivated a new wave of protests, beginning with a sit-in at a government headquarters on March 15. During this time, clashes between police and protesters

became more frequent and violent, with police firing live bullets targeting protesters' heads and protesters throwing petrol bombs. Correspondingly, the focus of the protests shifted to these police tactics, with protests explicitly calling for an independent commission to study the police's use of force ("Tao fan tiao li," 2019).

Besides the physical confrontation between the protesters and the police, social media was another important battlefield. Both protesters and the CCP sought to spread unverified information or disinformation that would discredit the other (Lee, 2020), though the central government had significantly greater resources to organize a disinformation campaign. While the CCP's troll army utilized a variety of platforms, Twitter emerged as a particularly prominent one because of Hong Kong activists' desires to garner international support (Twitter Safety, 2019).

2.2.2. Second Case: The Free Papua Movement

West Papua is a resource-rich territory on the western side of New Guinea; it integrated with Indonesia in 1969 (Blay, 2000). The Dutch allowed Indonesia to form an independent government in 1949 but did not hand over West Papua for more than a decade (Suter, 2001). West Papuans declared their sovereignty, raising their "morning star" flag in 1961, which was disregarded (Cordnell, 2013). Instead, the Dutch temporarily transferred sovereignty of West Papua to Indonesia under the New York Agreement (a 1962 treaty sponsored by the UN) without consulting West Papuans.

As the treaty stipulated that West Papuans have a right to self-determination, the UN oversaw a referendum in 1969: the Act of Free Choice ballot (Saltford, 2000). However, the Indonesian military picked only 1,026 West Papuan leaders to vote, using threats of death to force a unanimous vote (Cordnell, 2013). For this reason, West Papuans often call this referendum the "act of no choice" (Free West Papua Campaign, 2017).

The social movements working towards independence for West Papua are collectively known as the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM, which translates to the "free Papua movement"; see Blay, 2000). Though active since the 1960s, particularly during the anniversary of the New York Agreement (Gault-Williams, 1987; Viartasiwi, 2018), the 21st-century version of the OPM is largely organized by college students (Saud & Ashfaq, 2022). The movement gained attention on August 19, 2019, when 43 Papuan students were arrested for disrespecting (burning) the Indonesian flag (Heryanto, 2019). This led to a series of protests and repeated clashes between the activists and police, resulting in multiple injuries and deaths (Saud & Ashfaq, 2022). Escalating the conflict further, Indonesian police began to utilize more crowd control tactics, including the use of tear gas and rubber bullets (Adjie, 2020).

Like other social movements, young Papuan activists use social media such as Twitter to mobilize, raise awareness, and organize across cities (Panjaitan & Janah, 2022). Owing to its population, Indonesia is the fifth-largest country in terms of Twitter use, with over 24 million active Twitter accounts as of May 2016 (Mononimbar & Mononimbar, 2017). Though Twitter activity has declined since then, as it has had to compete with a growing plethora of other social media networks, Twitter remains a popular platform to discuss ongoing social issues and get news from government officials (Wiraguna et al., 2021).

2.2.3. Third Case: The Myanmar Coup

Throughout Myanmar's history, the Tatmadaw—the official name of Myanmar's armed forces—has been a significant part of its ruling structure since Myanmar gained its independence in 1948. Although the military granted civil government in 1960, it reclaimed its power in the 1962 coup. In 1990, believing that Myanmar's citizens would support the military, the military again granted a free election. However, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won. The military refused to give up power and eventually put leader Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest (Erlanger, 1990). The NLD claimed another victory in the 2015 election and the Tatmadaw agreed to give up its reign—but remained a powerful political force as it retained the right to appoint a quarter of the parliament members (Beech, 2021).

In the 2020 election, NLD won in a landslide victory, with over 80% of the votes (ထွန်း [Tun], 2020). Yet the military challenged the result, claiming the election was fraudulent. On February 1, 2021, the military detained Aung San Su Kyi and President U Win Myint, and instigated the 2021 coup (Goldman, 2021). This resulted in widespread non-violent protests across Myanmar in opposition to the Tatmadaw's coup, including labor strikes and pot-banging protests (Oo, 2021). The retaliation against these protests has been swift and bloody. According to Assistance Association for Political Prisoners' (2022) data, at least 1900 civilians have been killed and 11,000 are still detained because of the 2021 coup, as of 2022.

Given its political structure, Myanmar's telecommunication sector remained largely under state control (Kyaw, 2019). Though there were only about 500,000 users in 2011, the brief period of democracy contributed to an explosion in internet use. By 2019, Myanmar had over 21 million users, amounting to roughly 38.8% of its total population (Kemp, 2019). Among these users, Facebook is far and away the most popular platform (Kyaw, 2019). However, less than a month after instigating the coup, Facebook announced that they would ban content or accounts from the Tatmadaw, making it difficult for them to spread propaganda on that platform (Milko, 2021). In lieu, the Tatmadaw turned to other ways of distributing propaganda digitally, including the website Dsinfo (http://dsinfo.org).

2.3. Tactics of Government Repression

To study these cases, we must consider the varying strategies that a government can use to control citizens. Though scholars have historically focused on differences by severity, a review of the different tactics would allow researchers to understand how they work in tandem (Boudreau, 2004), both online and offline. In this study, we consider two tactics.

The first tactic that we account for is the use of violence, known as overt coercion (Gupta et al., 1993). State violence includes the mobilization of the military or the deployment of the police to control domestic populations (Johnston, 2012). While the use of state violence is perceived as commonplace in more autocratic countries (Escribà-Folch, 2013), democracies have also used violence to repress their citizenry. In East and Southeast Asia, state violence remains a popular tactic employed by governments or state leaders to maintain control because of its effectiveness (Boudreau, 2004). However, state violence is both expensive and perceived negatively in the international political system. As a result, states are motivated to seek other, complementary tactics.

The second tactic is state propaganda, which refers to a deliberate, systematic attempt to manipulate perceptions, cognitions, and behavior to achieve the desired intent of the propagandist (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). While states have long used propaganda to control the public during wartime (Meaney, 1951; Risso, 2014), a new form of state-sponsored digital propaganda has become globally prevalent in recent years. Computational propaganda, defined as the assemblage of social media platforms, autonomous agents, and big data tasked with the manipulation of public opinion, has been used by governments to silence and demobilize opposition and generate false support (Woolley & Howard, 2016). To that end, states operate cyber troops, employ various tools ranging from automation (e.g., bots) to human interaction (e.g., trolling), and produce disinformation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Using these tactics, states hope to (and often do) diminish the social movements' organizational and promotional capacity.

While there is little research that empirically studies whether a government is more likely to use propaganda or violence, propaganda production is relatively lower in cost compared to troops (Bennett, 2019). This is especially true with the internet, as governments can hire or outsource the production of digital propaganda on websites and social media platforms (Horz, 2021). Therefore, for low-resourced governments in Southeast Asia that want to repress domestic social movements, a digital propaganda campaign is a low-cost strategy. However, propaganda lacks the threatening power of state violence. Based on this logic, we expect that the Indonesian government, CCP, and Tatmadaw will use propaganda as a precursor to state violence (H1).

2.4. Government Repression and Polarization

We also consider how these government control tactics increase polarization within their countries by portraying their citizens as enemies of the state. We define polarization as the increasing salience of a difference within a society that reinforces an "us" and "them" tribal mentality (McCoy et al., 2018). While traditionally associated with a party difference (i.e., partisan polarization)—particularly when studying polarization in Western countries (Balčytienė & Juraitė, 2015)—a more expanded view of polarization considers other differences that polarize the citizenry within a country, such as religious or ethnic differences.

Polarization is not a phenomenon exclusive to the West: In the Global South, many political actors amplify polarization in order to achieve political goals (McCoy et al., 2018). Studies of polarization in the Global South have noted the polarizing effect of populist leaders (Uyheng & Montiel, 2020). This is especially problematic in Southeast Asia given the success of populist leaders in elections and the frequency with which these populist leaders become dictators (Case, 2017), including Suharto of Indonesia (Roosa, 2008). It is therefore important to consider how state leaders and governments may exacerbate polarization to achieve their political goals.

The damage that polarization induced by a state government has on democratic efforts and systems cannot be understated. For fledgling democracies, rapid polarization can help populist leaders exploit weak democratic institutions to win elections and gain political power. Countries in transition to democracies are also the most prone to political repression and violence (Regan & Henderson, 2002). At its most extreme, polarization can exacerbate differences to the extent that one political party may seek out authoritarian rule, utilizing whatever tactics are within its grasp to exclude oppositional members (McCoy et al., 2018).

In response to state-driven polarization, citizens can respond in several ways, including by organizing social movements. Employing a more traditional approach, the public may be more likely to protest when state governments employ strong and repressive tactics (Honari, 2018). Social movements may also use self-created news organizations to advance their beliefs and arguments (Agur & Frisch, 2019). This may damage democratic efforts further, as the availability of polarized news coverage can reorder social networks, build on cultural cleavages (Tokita et al., 2021), and make it difficult for pro-democracy social movements to successfully garner support (Camaj, 2021).

And finally, social movements may find a place to air their grievances on social media, which affords them the ability to organize and increase pressure against the state government. As independence and secession movements are often portrayed negatively in mainstream or state-owned media outlets, the internet has become critical for the relatively open production and dissemination

of pro-democracy political opinions, even in states with substantial censorship (Tang & Sampson, 2012).

What remains unclear, however, is the extent to which social movements are willing to protest once governments in Southeast Asia employ repressive tactics (i.e., propaganda and violence). It is possible that state repression, for example, produces a chilling effect that diminishes people's willingness to participate in social movements. However, citizens could also be emboldened to protest more, as Hong Kong activists had done in 2012 and 2014 (Purbrick, 2019).

In addition to H1, we then pose two research questions:

RQ1: In Hong Kong, West Papua, and Myanmar does more state propaganda production predict a change in social movement activities?

RQ2: In Hong Kong, West Papua, and Myanmar does more state violence predict a change in social movement activities?

3. Method: Using Time Series to Study Temporal Relationships

3.1. Data Collection

For our three cases, we analyzed at least four variables: (a) a daily count of anti-government protests organized by civilians; (b) a daily count of violent events instigated by a state government, its military, its police force, or a surrogate; (c) a daily count of the propaganda produced by a state-sponsored actor; and (d) daily counts of ideologically competing outlets within the country.

3.1.1. Event Variables

To construct a count of protests, we use the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (Raleigh, et al., 2010), focusing on protests organized by civilians that are critical of their domestic government. To construct a count of violent state coercion, we use the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone, a computationally-constructed event dataset (Leetaru & Schrodt, 2013). For our state violence time series, we focused on events instigated by a state's government (GOV), military (MIL), or police (COP); in the case of China, we also consider criminals (CRM) because the CCP regularly relies on "thugs-for-hire" (Ong, 2018) targeting a civilian population (CVL). We also only considered violent events with the following CAMEO verb codes: exhibit military posture (15), coerce (17), assault (18), fight, (19), and engage in unconventional mass violence (20). In the context of this study, violent events include situations when a government entity injures, threatens to injure, or kills a protester or civilian.

3.1.2. Propaganda Variable

To construct a count of propaganda messages for our cases, we relied on a variety of sources. For China/Hong Kong and Indonesia/West Papua, we utilized Twitter's information archive, specifically, the June 2020 archive of Chinese disinformation and the February 2020 archive of Indonesian disinformation targeting OPM (Twitter Safety, 2020). For Myanmar, we scraped articles posted on the "News" tab of the Dsinfo website, which is the Tatmadaw information team propaganda website.

3.1.3. News Variables

To construct counts of the news outlets in China/Hong Kong, Indonesia/West Papua, and Myanmar, we selected at least two outlets from each country. These outlets needed to be ideologically opposed; meaning that at least one outlet was pro-independence or pro-social movement and at least one outlet was pro-government.

For the China/Hong Kong case, we collected from the pro-Democracy newspaper *Apple Daily* using a Reddit archive (r/HongKong), the neutral newspaper *MingPao* from MediaCloud (Roberts, et al., 2021), and the pro-CCP outlet *China Daily* from LexisNexis (Weaver & Bimber, 2008). For the latter, we used the keywords 反修例 ("anti-amendment regulations"), 逃犯條例 ("extradition bill"), 反對逃犯條例修訂草案運動 ("the anti-extradition law amendment bill movement"), 時代革命 ("revolution of the times"), 修例风波 ("amendment regulation disturbance"), 暴亂 ("riot"), 暴動 ("riot"), and 五大訴求 ("five demands'').

For the Indonesian/West Papua case, we collected content from two outlets. The first was *Kompas*, one of the largest circulating newspapers in Indonesia (Muqsith et al., 2021), collected using MediaCloud (Roberts et al., 2021). Importantly, *Kompas* coverage of the protests was heavily critical of the protesting activities, particularly desecrating the Indonesian flag (Harsa & Rofil, 2021). The second is *West Papua Daily*, the largest circulating newspaper in Papua. Relative to *Kompas*, *West Papua Daily* is more likely to provide coverage from the perspective of the protesters (Harsa & Rofil, 2021). To collect *West Papua Daily* articles, we scraped the collection of articles available on their website. For both outlets, we searched for articles with the following keywords: "Organisasi Papua Merdeka" and its acronym "OPM," *konflict papua* ("Papua conflict"), "Jacob Prai" (the leader of OPM), "Republik Papua Barat" (the name of the proposed new country), *unjuk rasa* ("rally"), *kerusuhan* ("riot"), and *kemerdekaan* ("independence").

And, finally, in the Myanmar case, we collected news articles from four outlets using MediaCloud. Two outlets, *Irrawaddy* and *DVB*, are non-profit news organizations that are typically critical of the military government ("Myanmar military regime sues," 2021). *Myanmar News*, the third outlet, is an international-oriented outlet that brings global attention to Burmese

issues. Finally, the fourth outlet, *Myawaddy Daily*, is a military-owned newspaper. For this case, we searched using the following keywords: ပြည်သူ့ရဲတပ်ဖွဲ့ ("Myanmar police force"), အမျိုးသား ဒီမိုကရေစီ အဖွဲ့ချုပ် ("National League for Democracy"), အမျိုးသားညီညွတ်ရေး အစိုးရ ("National Unity Government"), တပ်မတော် ("Tatmadaw"), အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည် ("Aung San Suu Kyi"), မင်းအောင်လှိုင် ("Gen Min Aung Hlaing"), စစ်တပ် ("military"), and ဒီမိုကရေစီ ("democracy").

Finally, for Myanmar, we also collected Facebook content from CrowdTangle (2021), using the aforementioned keywords (this constituted a fifth variable for the Myanmar case).

3.2. Data Analysis

To test the temporal relationship between state violence and propaganda, we used a time series analysis; specifically, we constructed three vector autoregression (VARs) models, one for each country. In addition to treating violence (measured using GDELT) and propaganda (measured using a combination of scraped and archived digital data) as endogenous variables, we also included the following endogenous variables as controls: a daily count of protests and counts of news stories from domestic media. In the case of Myanmar, we include a fifth variable—a daily count of Facebook activity in groups and pages discussing the Myanmar coup.

We supplemented this with a close, qualitative textual analysis of a subset (n = 50) of propaganda messages in each case. To contextualize our findings, we present and discuss some of these messages in the results.

4. Results: Unpacking the Temporal Relationship Between Propaganda and State Violence

4.1. China and Hong Kong: Framing Protesters as Rioters to Justify Violence

Our analysis of state coercion in China and Hong Kong was centered around the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The VAR model examining state coercion in Hong Kong consisted of four types of variables: (a) counts of violent events by the Hong Kong Police Force; (b) counts of protests in Hong Kong that opposed Chinese oversight, (c) the number of disinformation tweets produced by CCP trolls, and (d) counts of news stories about protests in Hong Kong from three different news outlets (this was disaggregated in our model)—the pro-democracy outlet *Apple Daily*, the neutral outlet *Ming Pao*, and the state-sponsored outlet *China Daily*.

We pre-processed these time series by first differencing the integrated components and removing the weekly seasonality in the *Ming Pao* time series. The Bayesian Information Criterion suggested a VAR(2) model (BIC = 4182.064).

Granger causality tests provided evidence that a rise in propaganda tweets preceded a rise in violent state activities (χ^2 = 3.876, p = 0.023). However, we did not find a statistically significant relationship in the opposite direction (χ^2 = 0.249, p = 0.780). Our IRF confirmed the relationship between propaganda and violence but also found that it is short-lived, lasting two days (see Figure 1).

During this time, CCP trolls produced a variety of anti-protest propaganda. While some posts were in other languages to reach international audiences, the vast majority of tweets were written in Chinese characters. All these tweets framed the protesters as rioters, emphasizing their harmful or destabilizing actions. By contrast, the Hong Kong police were hailed as heroes and protectors of society.

Compared to the other cases, propaganda produced by CCP was the most specific to the event, and several tweets directly referenced individual protests. For example, in the tweet below (with translation), posted on June 22, a CCP troll refers to a protest that took place the day before:

> 6月21日,反對派又策劃實施咗一場黑衣人游行,並占領了稅務大廳,大批示威者包圍了警察總部,掟雞蛋,架設路障封閉道路。
>
> On June 21, the opposition planned and carried out a parade of people in black, and occupied the tax hall. A large number of demonstrators surrounded the police headquarters, beat eggs, and erected barricades to close the road.

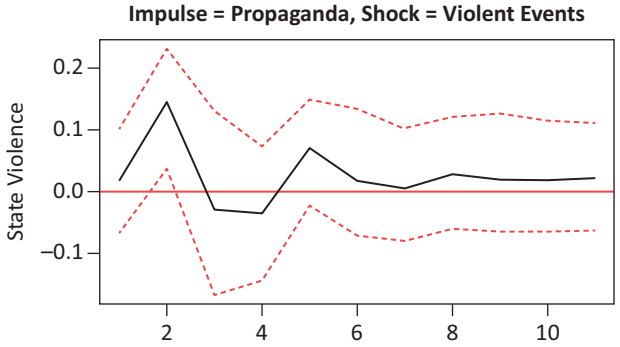

Figure 1. Impulse response function of propaganda on state violence, China.

Based on the GDELT data, there were more clashes between Hong Kong police and protesters over the next two days, with police using tear gas and rubber bullets to injure protesters, to the point where other countries would not sell crowd control equipment to Hong Kong (Wintour, 2019).

In terms of the other variables in mind, we also found that state violence events Granger-caused more articles in *Ming Pao* (χ^2 = 7.426, p < 0.001), and that propaganda Granger-caused more stories in *China Daily*. One reason for this increase in coverage may be an attempt to explain the state's actions. However, we did not find this pattern for *Apple Daily*, the pro-democracy outlet, and coercive state tactics did not Granger-cause any protest activity.

4.2. Indonesia and West Papua: Disinforming Citizens About the OPM

The VAR examining Indonesian state control of the Free Papua Movement consisted of four variables: (a) counts of violent state events, (b) a daily count of protests in West Papua, (c) the number of disinformation messages produced by Indonesian trolls, and (d) counts of news stories about the OPM in the Indonesian news outlet *Kompas* and *West Papua Daily*. After pre-processing the time series by first differencing the integrated components, we then constructed the VAR, using the BIC to settle on a lag of three (BIC = 10927.62).

Granger causality tests revealed that state propaganda Granger-caused violence (χ^2 = 2.729, p = 0.05), but not the other way around (χ^2 = 0.717, p = 0.54). Our IRF showed that the relationship between propaganda and violence persists for three days (see Figure 2).

During this time, the Indonesian government produced propaganda on Twitter in English and Bahasa Indonesia. Often, these tweets used first-person pronouns to create the appearance that an individual was sharing an opinion, as in the following example (with translation):

> Saya benar-benar menginginkan Papua yang damai dan sejujurnya para anggota OPM ataupun simpatisannya selalu menentang usaha-usaha menuju Papua yang damai.
>
> I really want a peaceful Papua and to be honest the members of the OPM or their sympathizers have always opposed efforts towards a peaceful Papua.

Other propaganda tweets contained disinformation about the social movement, including one false claim that OPM was founded by the Dutch:

> Organisasi Papua Merdeka adalah organisasi yg didirikan pada thn 1963 olh pemerintahan Belanda sbg upaya utk mendirikan negara tandingan nagar papua tidak menyatu dgn Indonesia.
>
> The Free Papua Organization is an organization founded in 1963 by the Dutch government as an effort to establish a rival state so that Papua is not integrated with Indonesia.

Many of these tweets also used the same hashtags in the same order, including popular hashtags like #freewestpapua and opinion-specific hashtags like #LawanGerakanSeparatis (highlighting opposition to the separatist movement). This implies simplicity from the Indonesian disinformation campaign, whose trolls were likely told to copy and paste a list of hashtags at the end of each tweet.

In terms of news, we find that protests Granger-cause news coverage in *Kompas* (χ^2 = 7.295, p < 0.001), but not in pro-democracy outlet *West Papua Daily*.

4.3. Myanmar: Election Fraud Propaganda

Finally, we examine the relationship between state coercion strategies in Myanmar during and following the 2021 coup, from February 1 to June 6, 2021. It contains five variable types: (a) a count of violent events conducted by the Tatmadaw, (b) a count of propaganda messages produced by the Tatmadaw for the website Dsinfo, (c) a daily count of protests in Myanmar, (d) a count of Facebook messages in Burmese and English

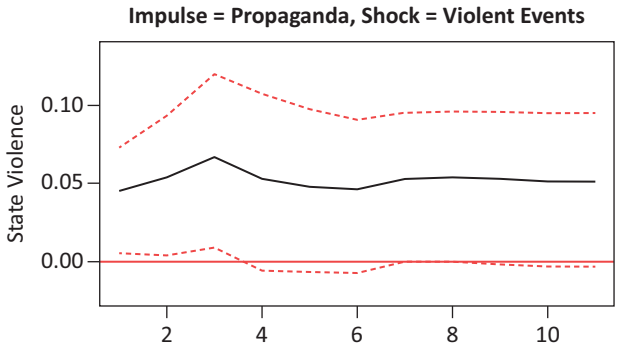

Figure 2. Impulse response function of propaganda on state violence, Indonesia.

about the coup, and (e) counts of news stories from four news outlets—*DVB*, *Irrawaddy*, *Myawaddy Daily*, and *Myanmar News*.

After pre-processing the time series by first differencing the integrated components and removing, we then constructed the VAR using the BIC to settle on a lag of two (BIC = 2239.92).

Our Granger causality results reveal a bidirectional relationship between propaganda and violence: propaganda Granger-causes violence (χ^2 = 6.946, p < 0.001) and violence Granger-causes propaganda (χ^2 = 7.731, p < 0.001). Our IRFs confirmed an increase in propaganda leads to an increase in state violence at a lag of two (see Figure 3), but state violence did not lead to an increase in propaganda.

The propaganda messages produced during this time are noteworthy because, after their removal from Facebook, the Tatmadaw began publishing its propaganda on the website dsinfo.org. Unlike social media messages, the Dsinfo messages were longer and read more like press releases as opposed to shorter posts. By and large, these posts were focused on legitimizing the Tatmadaw's regime, both by spreading false election claims and by framing the Tatmadaw as a bastion of democracy. For example, in a post about an ongoing protest, the Tatmadaw included the paragraph below (with translation):

> သဘောထားမတူမှုတို့အပေါ် မင်းမဲ့ စရိုက်ဆန်စွာ
> ရန်စတိုက်ခိုက်မှုမျိုးဆောင်ရွက်ခြင်းသည်
> ဒီမိုကရေစီကျင့်ဝတ်နှင့် တည်ဆဲ ဥပဒေအပေါ်
> ချိုးဖောက်ကျူးလွန်ခြင်းဖြစ်ကြောင်းနှင့်
> ရန်စတိုက်ခိုက်မှုများကို ဦးဆောင် ပြုလုပ်သူများအား
> လိုအပ်သည့် စုံစမ်းဖော်ထုတ်မှုပြုလုပ်၍ တရားဥပဒေနှင့်အညီ
> ထိရောက်စွာ အရေးယူဆောင်ရွက်သွားမည်ဖြစ်ကြောင်း
> သတင်းရရှိသည်။
>
> Dissenting, anarchic attacks violate democratic ethics and existing laws, and those responsible will be prosecuted in accordance with the law.

In doing so, they framed themselves as being the group to determine acceptable "democratic ethics and existing laws." When protesters or the NLD were mentioned, they were framed very negatively, as rioters, insurgents, or terrorists.

Our model also highlights several relationships between other variables and Facebook activity: state violence Granger-causes Facebook activity (χ^2 = 5.216, p = 0.007) and Facebook activity Granger-causes both protests (χ^2 = 3.947, p = 0.04) and news stories in *Myawaddy Daily* (χ^2 = 9.926, p < 0.000). The impulse response functions (see Figure 4) suggested a negative relationship between state violence and Facebook, and a positive relationship between Facebook and protests. In other words: More posts in anti-Tatmadaw Facebook groups increased the number of protests; however, increase state violence led to decreased Facebook activity.

Finally, we found some potential agenda-setting relationships: *Myanmar News* Granger-caused *Irrawaddy* news (χ^2 = 12.124, p < 0.000) and *Irrawaddy* news Granger-caused Facebook activity (χ^2 = 3.500, p < 0.03). These findings suggest that reactions to state repressive tactics may be more identifiable through social media rather than news media.

4.4. Model Comparisons

Our analysis of these cases revealed some key similarities and differences. First, let us begin with a summary of Granger causality tests (see Table 1).

One consistent finding is that propaganda preceded violence as a state repression tactic; however, the reverse was not found. These findings provide evidence for H1: Governments' use of propaganda preceded state violence targeted at social movements and activists. Note that this is not a causal finding, but a temporal one: Propaganda does not cause violence, but an increase in propaganda may be useful to predict forthcoming violence.

Another similarity we find is in the content of the propaganda messages: In all three cases, the goal of some propaganda messages was to polarize people's perceptions of the opposing social movement. However, countries varied in the discursive strategies they employed. Whereas Indonesian propaganda relied

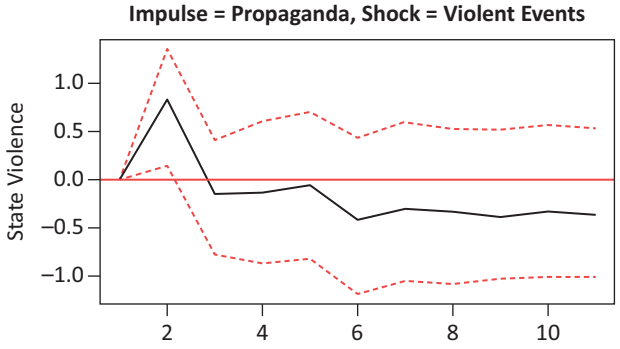

Figure 3. Impulse response function of propaganda on state violence, Myanmar.

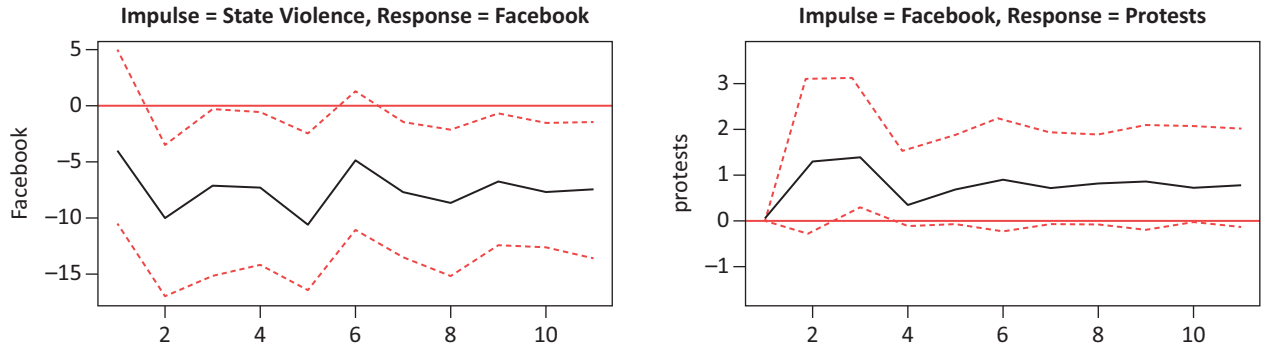

Figure 4. Impulse response function about Facebook activity, Myanmar.

on disinformation about the development of the OPM, Chinese disinformation highlighted specific claims of violence to motivate disapproval of the Hong Kong protests. Focusing more on election fraud claims, the Tatmadaw repeatedly brought up democratic principles, but framed themselves as pro-democracy and the NLD as anti-democratic.

We also find varying levels of sophistication. Whereas Chinese propaganda messages relied on a variety of hashtags, Indonesian tweets used the same hashtags in the same order, which makes the latter easier to identify. Myanmar, compared to the other two cases, had an even simpler propaganda campaign. The reasons for these differences are likely motivated by the conflict's contextual factors and the state governments' resources: Myanmar's disinformation and violence campaign may have been simpler because the Tatmadaw needed to build a response to the protests quickly, whereas China and Indonesia have been in continue disagreement with protesters for years.

In addition to the polarizing propaganda and the temporal relationship between state repressive strategies, we also asked two research questions regarding whether a rise in propaganda (RQ1) and state violence (RQ2) would predict a change in social movement activities, which could include protests, pro-democracy/secession news activity, or (in the case of Myanmar) social media activity. Our results provide little evidence that state coercion Granger-caused protests or increased coverage from pro-democracy or secession outlets, though we do find that state coercive tactics could increase news coverage in pro-government and moderate outlets.

In Myanmar, however, we find that state violence decreased Facebook activity, which in turn Granger-caused more offline protests. This suggests that the polarizing conflict between social movements and state governments may be especially prevalent on social media and highlights the need for greater integration of social media data with offline activities and consequences.

5. Discussion: Implications of Findings for Future Research and Activism

In addition to confirming the use of different tactics for state repression (Boudreau, 2004; Gupta et al., 1993), this study also suggests that states strategically coordinate their tactics. As propaganda is cheaper to utilize than military or police violence (Bennett, 2019), weak states that seek to control their citizenry may be incentivized to use propaganda first for cost reasons. However, given the persistence of the protests, it appears that states still often resort to violence as it often guarantees the dispersal of protesters (whether by arrests, pain, or death).

The content of the messages also revealed how states can potentially aggravate polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), particularly by contrasting the government as good and the protesters as evil. While it is beyond the scope of this analysis to assess the persuasiveness of these messages, it is worth noting the variability of the discursive tactics used, including references to specific events (China), disinformation (Indonesia), personalized language (Indonesia), and reframing the government as positive in addition to framing the opposition as negative (China and Myanmar). These insights help advance the concept of polarization beyond Western countries and highlight the ability of states to exacerbate polarization to delegitimize oppositional protests.

Given that the relationship between state coercive strategies is temporally predictable, this information may

Table 1. Summary of Granger causality test results between propaganda and violence.

	Propaganda → Violence		Violence → Propaganda	
	χ^2	p-value	χ^2	p-value
China	3.876	0.023	0.249	0.780
Indonesia	2.729	0.043	0.718	0.541
Myanmar	6.945	0.001	7.731	0.001

also be valuable for democratic social movements to predict and avoid state violence. Such an insight would be especially important to protesters in East and Southeast Asia, where the political regime landscape is constantly changing (Case, 2017).

No study is perfect, and there is no exception. First, our analyses focus on three cases in East and Southeast Asia, and the generalizability of these findings may be limited beyond this region. Additionally, our Myanmar case included a unique data layer: social media discourse about the Tatmadaw. Given the statistically significant findings based on the inclusion of social media metrics, this work suggests a need to conflict more analyses of how online activity and offline discourse intersect.

Acknowledgments

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Another Violent Protest? New Perspectives to Understand Protest Coverage

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Abstract
This study assesses the relationship between two well-established sets of frames to better understand the news coverage of massive political protests. By relying on Semetko and Valkenburg's generic frames and McLeod and Hertog's protest frames, this study aims to identify whether certain generic frames emphasized in news stories increase the tendency to delegitimize protest movements. To this end, we analyzed the news coverage of Chile's Estallido Social, a series of massive political demonstrations that developed across the country from October to December 2019. Data for this study come from stories published by Radio Bío Bío, the most trusted news outlet in the country, according to Reuters Institute. By analyzing a sample of 417 stories, we found the coverage replicated patterns that usually delegitimize protest movements, as many of the stories focused on violent acts and depicted demonstrators as deviant from the status quo. We also found a direct relationship between generic frames and protest frames, in which the presence of the former determines that of the latter. Generic frames provide information about how the news media interpret and package the news, which in turn affects demonstration-related features that the news media pay attention to. As such, we argue that combining both generic and issue-specific frames is a helpful approach to understanding the complexities of protest news coverage.

Keywords
Chile; Estallido Social; generic frames; issue-specific frames; protest; Radio Bío Bío

Issue
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1. Introduction

The year 2019 will be remembered as a year of mass protests, particularly in Latin America. Chile, Colombia, Bolivia, Honduras, Puerto Rico, Peru, Venezuela, and Ecuador saw their citizens take to the streets to mobilize against governments' decisions, social inequalities, political scandals, and allegations of electoral fraud (Wolff, 2020). These massive protests had vastly different economic and political consequences—for Bolivia, it was the resignation of President Evo Morales; for Chile, it was the process of drafting a new constitution. In each case, the protests captured the attention of national and international news media, who set the tone with which the audiences would perceive these demonstrations.

Protests are means of expression used to show disapproval or objection to something (or someone) by individuals who are powerless and cannot prevent that "something" from happening, from social injustice to political corruption (Turner, 1969). As such, protesting is a tool to draw attention to injustice and wrongdoing affecting a group, one that requires a combination of public

sympathy and news media interest to accomplish the group's goals. This complex combination can transform the perception of a protest from a peaceful, persuasive event to a coercive action based on extreme violence.

The news media play a significant role in how the public perceives the protest message, depending on how such message is presented in a story. Research on protest coverage has identified several frames the news media use to make sense of protest movements, from sympathetic portrayals (covering protesters' grievances and demands) to extreme depictions of protests and protesters, presenting those as violent and deviant, respectively (e.g., McCluskey et al., 2009; McLeod, 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). The "protest paradigm" is probably the most studied frame to explain protest coverage, focusing on the media practice of highlighting destruction and violence by demonstrators, quoting official sources, and marginalizing the core reasons behind the movement (Jiménez-Martínez, 2021).

However, the literature has paid little attention to generic frames in the context of mass protests. Initially proposed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), *generic frames* describe perspectives highlighted in news coverage regardless of the issue at hand. In contrast, *issue-specific frames* pertain to the news topic under study, analyzing specific characteristics and proposing categories that allow for great specificity and detail (Kozman, 2017). In opposition to generic frames, which can transcend topic limitations, issue-specific frames are subject to topic restraints (de Vreese, 2005).

The present study focuses on one set of issue-specific frames proposed by Hertog and McLeod (2001) to study protest coverage. We observe whether certain generic frames increase the salience of specific protest frames in the coverage of massive protest movements. We do so to respond to Kozman's (2017, p. 780) call to study generic and issue-specific frames together: "Generic frames take more of an interpretive, packaging role that could work in tandem with any issue-specific frame, without taking a stance or defining the problem at hand." By doing so, we want to explore the potential of a mixed-frame approach to better understand the complexity of protest news coverage. We argue that protests should be studied using both sets of frames to observe how the presence of certain frames influences the presence of other frames.

Our study analyzes the news coverage of Chile's Estallido Social, a series of massive political demonstrations that developed across the country from October to December 2019. Like many countries in Latin America in 2019, Chile experienced a social-political crisis that aroused broad citizen support. However, the acts of violence were highly emphasized by the news media and ended up obscuring the social demands. By observing how a highly trusted news outlet in Chile covered the Estallido, we aim to understand the framing strategies used by the news media when covering social transformation in a Latin American country.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Frames and Framing Theory

According to framing theory, the news media select and emphasize the elements they consider more relevant to inform an event (Entman & Rojecki, 1993). These elements directly resonate with the audience's internalized mental schemes, affecting how they understand and evaluate an issue (Goffman, 1974; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). As proposed by Reese (2001, p. 11), frames are "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world." Frames not only affect how people interpret reality, but also provide journalists and communicators with guidelines and patterns to cover the news (McLeod & Detenber, 1999).

Framing research has developed several typologies for the study of journalism practice, from the thematic-episodic dichotomy to explain big-picture coverage versus immediate, non-contextual reporting (Iyengar, 1991), to generic versus issue-specific frames, focused on explaining how issues are portrayed versus functional descriptions of a specific issue (Entman et al., 2009; Kozman, 2017).

Generic frames refer to the way the news media present or package any issue (Kozman, 2017), allowing for the comparison of different issues (de Vreese et al., 2001). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) proposed five generic frames that have been profusely studied in the framing literature: conflict, attribution of responsibility, human interest, economic consequences, and morality. While the conflict frame focuses on the conflicts between individuals, institutions, and groups, the responsibility frame attributes responsibility to a certain actor for the cause of an event or problem. The human-interest frame emphasizes human faces and emotional angles in a story to make it more relatable, and the economic consequences frame highlights the economic effects of an event. Lastly, the morality frame reports an event regarding moral or religious values.

Several studies around the globe have proved the broad applicability of generic frames when studying news coverage (e.g., Camaj, 2010; de Vreese, 2005). However, some scholars have pointed out the need to question the truth of this broad applicability when the diversity of countries' socio-historical contexts is taken into consideration (e.g., Aruguete & Koziner, 2014). For example, Aruguete (2010) proposed two additional frames after analyzing the presence of generic frames in Argentina's news: conflict with human impact and conflict resolution. The latter is supported by Gronemeyer and Porath (2017), for whom the context of the study might suggest the need for local adaptations to the original set of five generic frames. For instance, when studying the presence of generic frames in the elite press, Gronemeyer et al., (2020) identified two new frames: defense or damage control frame, which refers

to mitigating the damage caused by someone, and the informative frame, centered in providing objective information and data in a neutral tone.

In contrast to generic frames, *issue-specific frames* are pertinent only to specific topics or events (de Vreese, 2005) and reveal aspects of those topics selected or left out of the coverage (Kozman, 2017). An example of issue-specific frames is protest frames, developed to understand how the news media cover protest movements (Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Studies have shown the news media tend to ignore social movements, especially in the early stages (McLeod, 2007; Shahin et al., 2016; Shoemaker, 1982), but once their actions become more disruptive, the news media pay attention and center their coverage on the violence, portraying the movement from an antagonistic perspective (Mourão et al., 2021). This pattern has been studied profusely, showing that protest movements are more likely to be covered negatively, depicting protests as violent and protesters as deviant, which delegitimizes the group and its demands (McCluskey et al., 2009; McLeod & Hertog, 1992).

2.2. Research on Protest Frames

McLeod and Hertog's typology of protest frames (Hertog & McLeod, 2001; McLeod & Hertog, 1999) includes five framing categories to cover massive demonstrations: confrontation, riot, spectacle (or circus/carnival), debate, and protest. The confrontation frame focuses on the conflicts between protesters and the police, the government, and even the news media. The riot frame emphasizes the violence of protesters and the damages they cause to society, such as lootings and harm to public property. The spectacle frame puts an accent on the oddity, the drama, and the large-scale impact of the demonstrations. The debate frame is probably the only "positive" portrayal in Hertog and McLeod's typology, as this frame covers different points of view and takes distance from the criminalization of protest movements. Lastly, the protest frame focuses on the event of the protest itself. It makes detailed descriptions from beginning to end, describing protesters' activities, police actions, and basically the dos of everyone involved. However, in subsequent studies, Hertog and McLeod (2001) pointed out the protest frame made very few appearances in the news coverage and, as such, it has not been consistently included in protest-frame studies.

But regardless of the number of categories, protest frames can impact how audiences perceive a protest and how they react to it (Mourão & Kilgo, 2021). For example, the presence of confrontation and riot provokes more criticism toward protesters and fewer complaints against the police, even during episodes of police brutality. On the other hand, when the coverage legitimizes the protest—as is the case in the debate frame—there is greater identification with protesters and more support for their demands (Kilgo & Mourão, 2021). Several authors (e.g., Harlow et al., 2020; Kilgo et al., 2018; Kilgo & Mourão, 2021) have adopted the protest frame typology with some modifications. Instead of analyzing the five frames proposed by Hertog and McLeod, recent studies only use four of the five framing types—confrontation, riot, spectacle, and debate. As Kilgo et al. (2018) explain, the most common frames presented in the news are the ones that marginalize the protest (confrontation, riot, and spectacle), while the ones that aim to legitimize are not so frequent in the mainstream media (debate and protest). However, they mention that the debate frame gives a more substantial voice and space for protesters to express their grievances and demands. Therefore, the "protest" frame has been elided in this new typology proposal.

Recent studies provide nuance to the delegitimization trend in protest coverage. While spectacle is the most common frame when covering protests, Kilgo (2020) points out that the reason behind a protest determines the presence of other frames. For example, the riot frame shows up in racial issues, while the spectacle frame goes together with the debate frame in the coverage of gender, health, and environment-related protests. This is consistent with findings from studies describing the predominance of the spectacle frame, and the incidence of social causes in how the public perceives demonstrations. Nevertheless, some researchers have observed the prominence of other frames over spectacle, like riot or confrontation (Mourão et al., 2021).

Harlow et al. (2020) add that the protest's geographical context also determines what frames are more prominent. In the case of Latin America, the spectacle frame is most common, but the debate frame also shows up frequently, probably because of changes in how social movements are perceived by the public (Harlow et al., 2020). Additionally, news media ideology, and how close to the government the media are, could also impact the coverage—the closer the media are to the authorities, the more they will have to stick to riot and confrontation portrayals (Shahin et al., 2016).

2.3. A Mixed-Framing Approach to Understanding Protest Coverage

This study follows Kozman's (2017) approach to framing research, which advocates for the simultaneous study of generic and issue-specific frames to understand how the news media portray issues of public interest. Kozman (2017)—and also Brüggemann and D'Angelo (2018)—explored the possibility of jointly applying different framing approaches when conducting framing research. Scholars have pointed out a lack of consistency when it comes to identifying frames, with studies proposing their own framing typologies for each new topic they observe (Cacciatore et al., 2016; Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007,). To address this issue, Kozman (2017) suggests not creating new typologies but to integrate existing ones, particularly generic

and issue-specific frames, to complement their functions and reach the specificity needed.

The present study draws upon Kozman's call and aims to examine the nature of the relationship between generic and protest frame typologies. Generic frames present a general perspective of journalistic values when portraying protest news. In contrast, protest frames (as issue-specific frames) highlight specific characteristics and elements of massive demonstrations in relationship to selection and salience. As studies combining both sets of frames are scarce, the literature does not suggest whether generic frames precede and determine issue-specific frames or vice versa. However, generic frames reflect journalistic norms and routines—when journalists pack the news from a certain perspective, those packages teach us about journalism and the worldview of news producers. Thus, we argue that generic frames precede issue-specific frames, and therefore affect which issue-specific frames will be emphasized in the coverage. For instance, violent demonstrations might be addressed using moral values, economic consequences, or attribution of responsibilities. And each approach will lead to different news angles. Then, this study inquires about which generic frames are more impactful in the emergence of protest frames. As such, we ask:

> RQ: Which generic frames increase the salience of issue-specific frames in protest news coverage?

2.4. Research on Chile's Protest News Coverage

Protests and popular mobilizations have played an important role in Latin America's history (Johnston & Almeida, 2006), and have been studied from different perspectives and disciplines, including sociology (e.g., Somma & Bargsted, 2015), political science (e.g., Disi Pavlic, 2020), and mass communication (e.g., Valenzuela, 2013). In the case of Chile, the study of protests has gained more attention due to the many demonstrations the country has experienced in the last decade. Most of the recent mass communication literature on Chile's protests relates to social media use and protest participation (e.g., Valenzuela et al., 2012, 2018), but framing research about protest coverage is still scarce, and mostly focused on issue-specific frames. For example, Pérez Arredondo (2016) found the news media systematically criminalized protesters and left aside their demands while covering Chile's college students' protests in 2011. Similarly, Sáez Gallardo (2019) found that news portrayal of Mapuche people (one of Chile's indigenous groups) depicted this group as extremely violent and deviant from the status quo. These findings indicate a pattern of negative coverage when it comes to protests and protest participants. However, these and other studies (e.g., Bonner & Dammert, 2021) about protest coverage in Chile are focused mostly on newspaper coverage. While the print press is said to be the main agenda setter worldwide (McCombs, 2014; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001), Chilean audiences are concentrated in other media, such as television, radio, and especially social media. In fact, the majority of Chileans rely on social platforms (particularly Facebook) to consume news, and the most trusted news outlet in the country is a radio news network, Radio Bío Bío (Newman et al., 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). And yet, radio news coverage remains understudied compared to print and television. Our study aims to fill this gap in the literature, at least to some extent, by looking at Radio Bío Bío's coverage of Chile's Estallido Social.

2.5. Chile's Political Unrest

While Chile has witnessed several protest movements in the last 10 years, the demonstrations linked to the social unrest in 2019 (popularly called Estallido Social) reached a breakpoint in the country's social and political context, with an unexpected degree of violence and aggressive reactions from the authorities and the police (Sehnbruch & Donoso, 2020). While some were surprised by this social eruption, there were clear cues announcing what was coming.

On October 7, 2019, groups of high-school students began small demonstrations in Santiago against increasing public transportation fares. While the protests started peacefully, the tensions between students and the police increased, and the chaos escalated quickly. By October 18, demonstrations had spread through the country, this time becoming a large movement of people marching the streets to protest the government as well as endless social injustice. However, messages in favor of dignity and equity were tainted by riots and violent acts performed by isolated groups. The images of buildings and public transportation in flames, and lootings in pharmacies and grocery stores, were the ones the news media broadcast to cover the protests, which ended up criminalizing part of the movement.

Chile's Estallido Social is part of a series of political crises in Latin America that began in 2019, demanding equity and dignity. Still, when the media covered these movements, the focus was on the chaos and violence, criminalizing the movements and exacerbating social conflict (Chacón & Rivera, 2020).

3. Methods

Data for this study come from stories published by Radio Bío Bío, the most popular radio news network in Chile, and the most trusted news outlet in the country, according to Reuters Institute (Newman et al., 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). As social media in general, and Facebook in particular, have become the main source for Chilean audiences to get informed (Newman et al., 2022), we content-analyzed news stories published on Radio Bío Bío's Facebook page. We produced two constructed weeks to cover two months of data—from October 18 (the day when the protests escalated) to December 18, 2019.

We built a Python script to retrieve all news stories published on Radio Bío Bío's Facebook page in those two constructed weeks. We retrieved around 2,500 stories and randomly selected 1,200 stories to code for 1 = *unrest-related stories*, and 0 = *other stories*. The material was coded by three undergraduate students unfamiliar with the study goals. Following Lacy et al.'s (2015) best practices for content analysis, the authors of this study developed the codebook and trained the coders, but did not code the material to avoid researcher bias. Coders were recruited from Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile Summer Research Program, a university-wide initiative developed for undergraduate students to get involved in academic research. Based on a subsample of 120 stories (not included in the final sample), and using the ReCal3 software (Freelon, 2010), inter-coder reliability (ICR) reached 93% agreement and a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.84.

We identified 657 stories about the political unrest, from which we randomly selected a sample of 417 stories to code for generic and protest frames. We left the remaining 240 stories to train the coders and select a subsample of 40 stories to calculate ICR in this second stage. To identify generic frames, we coded for items validated by previous framing research (Burscher et al., 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2017) and described them in Table 1. As some stories aimed to provide the public with practical, useful information (e.g., subway stations not working), we also coded for public service (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Some stories did not fit into the five generic frames, so we created the option Other. To code for issue-specific frames, we used Hertog and McLeod's (2001) categories also extensively validated by research on protest frames (e.g., Harlow et al., 2020; Kilgo & Mourão, 2021). Our three coders reached ICR levels ranging from 91% of agreement (Krippendorff's alpha of 0.67) to 100% (Krippendorff's alpha of 1) for all the variables coded in the study. Table 1 describes measurements and ICR values for each variable.

To estimate the relationship between generic frames and protest frames, we modeled a multinomial logistic regression with protest frames as the multicategory dependent variable (with Does Not Apply as the reference category) and the five generic frames, public service, and Other as independent variables.

4. Results

Descriptive findings indicate news stories portrayed Chile's political unrest from either the Riot (26%) or the Confrontation (12%) perspectives, while a minority of stories paid attention to the protesters' motivations by using the Debate frame (7.5%). Just a few stories reported the unrest from the Spectacle frame (5%). However, half of the analyzed stories did not fit into any of the protest frames (see Figure 1), as an important proportion of the coverage focused on informing the audience about safe ways to move around the city. As such, those were unrest-related stories but did not necessarily address the unrest using protest frames.

In terms of generic frames, results show the most prominent frame was the attribution of responsibility frame (28%), followed by the conflict frame (27%). In other words, the coverage paid special attention to the conflict itself, and those responsible for it. Only 5.6% of the stories portrayed the unrest from the moral perspective, judging both the government and the protesters for hurting the country. The economic consequences (5%) and the human interest (3.5%) frames were at the bottom of the rank (see Figure 2). Similar to Figure 1, Figure 2 illustrates that stories tackled other perspectives, such as the public service perspective (providing practical information to audiences) and information that did not really fit into generic-frame categories.

RQ inquired about the nature of the relationship between generic frames and protest frames in the news coverage of Chile's political unrest. We modeled two multinomial logistic regressions to answer RQ. In the first model, we included Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) five generic frames, as well as the public service and the Other variables. Due to the small number of stories presenting the economic consequences and the human-interest frames (as illustrated in Figure 2), floating-point overflow occurred while computing the regression values for many cells (see Supplementary File). To reduce the number of missing values, we removed the economic consequences and the human-interest frames from the predictors and ran a second model (see Table 2), which allowed for a more parsimonious and accurate analysis of the data.

Results from the second multinomial logistic regression suggest that certain generic frames increase the presence of protest frames in the news coverage. The attribution of responsibility frame increased the presence of the Riot, the Confrontation, and the Spectacle perspectives, blaming protesters for the violent clashes, looting, and arson attacks occurring during the analyzed timeframe. In fact, most of the stories using both responsibility and Riot frames blamed protesters for violent episodes. The conflict frame was associated with a higher presence of both the Riot and the Confrontation perspectives, with stories emphasizing the mismatch between protesters and their grievances, and the official response from the government. Interestingly enough, the morality frame was the only generic frame positively associated with the Debate frame. Stories portraying the political unrest from a moral perspective relied on official and unofficial source quotes to suggest how the government should react and how protesters should behave, for both of them to reach at least some degree of understanding. At the same time, these stories were more likely to emphasize the motivations and reasons behind the unrest, therefore increasing the Debate perspective. Neither the public service variable nor the Other variable were significantly associated with the protest frames.

Table 1. Generic and protest frames codebook and ICR.

Frame categories	Coding categories	Description	Agreement	Krippendorff's alpha
Conflict frame (coded as 1 if either [a] or [b] are coded 1)	(a) Conflict	If the story reflected disagreement between parties, individuals, groups, or countries, it was coded as 1. If not, it was coded as 0.	93%	0.83
	(b) Sides	If the story referred to two sides or more than two sides of the problem, it was coded as 1. If not, it was coded as 0.	96%	0.79
Responsibility frame (coded as 1 if [a] was coded 1)	(a) Attribution of responsibility	If the story attributed the responsibility of a problem/situation to something or someone, it was coded as 1. If not, it was coded as 0.	86%	0.67
	(b) Responsible person, group, or institution	Coders were prompted to identify the person/institution responsible for the problem/situation, according to the story: (1) the government, (2) politicians, (3) protesters, (4) society, (5) the police, and (6) others.	86%	0.70
Economic consequences frame (coded as 1 if either [a] or [b] are coded 1)	(a) Economic cost	If the story discussed the financial costs/degree of the expense involved, or financial losses or gains, it was coded as 1. If not, it was coded as 0.	98%	0.93
	(b) Economic consequence	If the story discussed the economic consequences of adopting a certain course of action, it was coded as 1. If not, it was coded as 0.	98%	0.87
Human interest frame (coded as 1 if either [a] or [b] are coded 1)	(a) Feelings	If the story employed adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of empathy, rage, or concern, it was coded 1. If not, it was coded as 0.	100%	1
	(b) Emotional resources	If the story provided a human example or a human face to the issue, it was coded as 1. If not, it was coded as 0.	100%	1
Morality frame	(a) Moral message	If the story included a moral/ethical message or a social judgment, it was coded as 1. If not, it was coded as 0.	95%	0.72
Public service		If the story provided the reader with useful information to make decisions, it was coded as 1. If not, it was coded as 0.	96%	0.78
Other		If the story was coded as 0 in all the previous categories, it was coded as 1 in this category.	95%	0.95
Protest frames		If the story focused on the disruptive behavior of the demonstrators (and the effects the latter has on society), it was coded as Riot (1). If the story focused on the confrontations between protesters and the police, it was coded as Confrontation (2). If the story focused on the "spectacular" elements of the protest and its context in Chilean history (strangeness or unusualness, massiveness and scope, emotion, and drama), it was coded as Spectacle (3). If the story focused on the protest agenda or demands, aiming to inform about the issues defended by the social movement, it was coded as Debate (4). If the story did not cover protests/demonstrations, or if the protest was presented as a peaceful event, it was coded as Does Not Apply (5).	89%	0.82

Note: Burscher et al. (2014) included a second item to code for morality when the story made references to God or other religious tenets, but we dropped this item as absolutely none of the stories discussed religious issues.

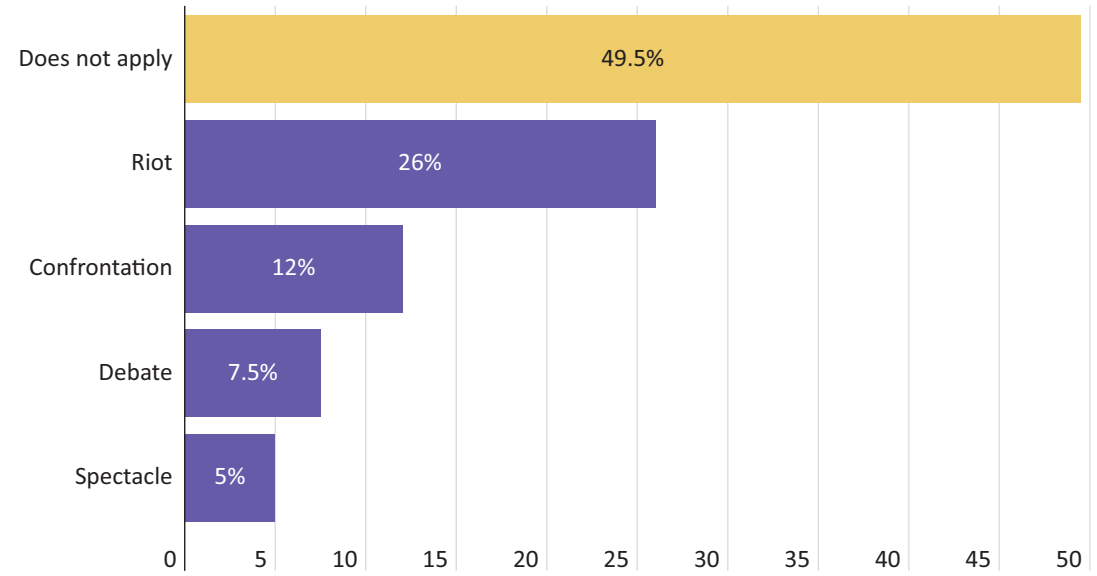

Figure 1. Distribution of stories according to protest frames.

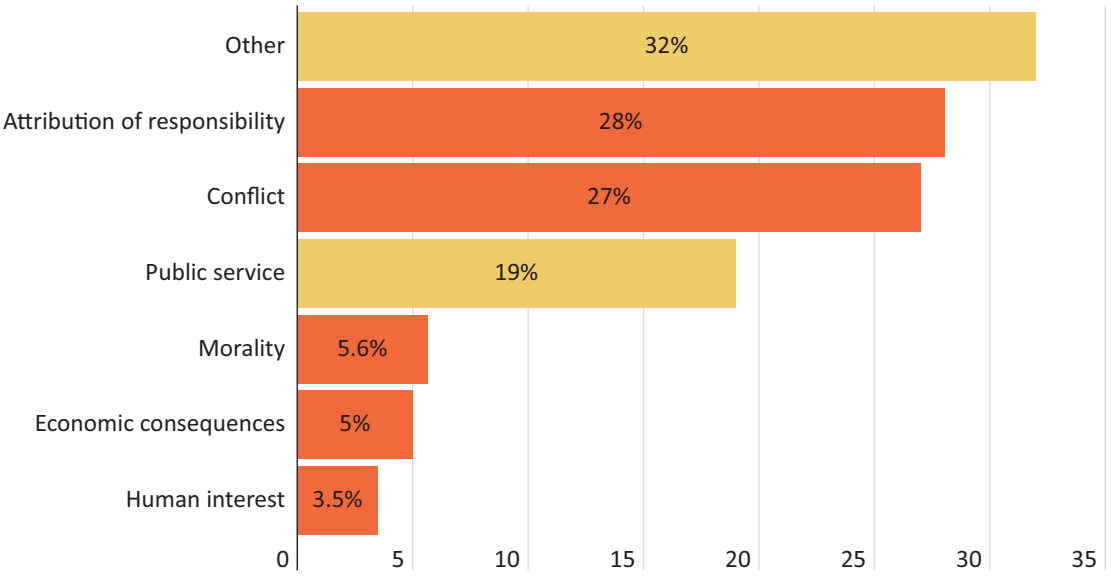

Figure 2. Distribution of stories according to generic frames. Note: Percentages add up to more than 100% as a story might present more than one frame.

Table 2. Multinomial logistic regression to explain protest frames.

Protest frames [a]		OR	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Riot				
	Conflict	0.46*	0.22	0.94
	Responsibility	4.71***	2.32	9.55
	Morality	0.00	0.00	b
	Public service	0.78	0.36	1.69
	Other	0.88	0.40	1.93
Confrontation				
	Conflict	4.19***	1.73	1.13
	Responsibility	22.51***	8.21	61.73
	Morality	2.12	0.21	21.23
	Public service	0.93	0.29	2.97
	Other	2.27	.53	9.69
Spectacle				
	Conflict	1.27	0.35	4.60
	Responsibility	6.20**	1.58	24.40
	Morality	0.00	0.00	0.00
	Public service	0.61	0.11	3.54
	Other	2.50	0.50	12.44
Debate				
	Conflict	1.79	0.44	7.36
	Responsibility	0.72	0.14	3.73
	Morality	6.22*	1.27	3.50
	Public service	0.67	0.13	3.51
	Other	2.02	0.45	9.09

Notes: (a) Does Not Apply was used as the reference category in the dependent variable; (b) floating point overflow occurred while computing this statistic, and its value is therefore set to system missing; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Discussion

This study explored the relationship between generic frames and protest frames in the news media coverage of Chile's social and political unrest in 2019. By analyzing news stories published by Radio Bío Bío, our findings are consistent with previous research regarding protest coverage. The stories replicated the patterns that usually delegitimize the protest, as they focused on the violent acts and the depiction of protesters as deviant from the status quo (McCluskey et al., 2009; McLeod & Hertog, 1992). Our results show that frames related to protest delegitimization were prominent, with a higher presence of the Riot (26%) and Confrontation (12%) perspectives, similar to what Mourão et al. (2021) found. However, we also found a low presence of the Spectacle frame (5%), challenging what Harlow et al. (2020) found for Latin American countries.

When looking at both sets of frames together, our results show consistent relation patterns. Given that Riot and Confrontation are the most-used protest frames in the coverage, it makes sense that the most prominent generic frame is the attribution of responsibility. When covering the protest, the news media not only emphasized violent actions but also inquired about those responsible for such violent actions. Similarly, the presence of the Confrontation frame was linked to the clashes between protesters and the police portrayed in the stories, which in turn explains the presence of the conflict frame. By putting together generic and protest frames, we observe in detail the perspective used to depict the protest (a delegitimizing perspective) and the general portrayal used to build the news narrative (conflict and responsibility attribution), making evident what is important for the Chilean news media.

While the attribution of responsibility frame increased the presence of most of the protest frames, it did not increase the presence of the Debate frame. As such, the coverage did not focus on the social demands behind the protest or the course of action for the future. Consequently, the news media focused on describing and judging violent actions, but not necessarily on problem-solving.

Harlow et al. (2020) found a high presence of the Debate frame, something we did not find in our study, as only 7.5% of the stories used this frame. Nevertheless,

we want to point out the relevance of the Debate and morality frames correlation. Chile's social unrest originates from demands against social injustice, such as the right to access quality health and education services. In this case, the Debate frame questioned Chilean society as a whole from a moral perspective. Rather than presenting the protest in a positive way, it provided support to the protest demands.

These results highlight the nature of the relationship between both sets of frames, in which the presence of generic frames influences the salience of certain protest frames. For instance, when covering a riot, the most salient elements in the story aimed to identify the responsible for violent actions (when using the attribution of responsibility frame) or describe the sides in the conflict (when using the conflict frame). Consequently, the riot as an event was not necessarily the main focus of analysis, but certain riot features were determined by the most prominent generic frame used to portray the story.

Additionally, an intriguing finding was the high number of stories not fitting into any of the protest frames, as well as stories that did not use any of the generic frames. While issue-specific frames reveal what aspects are salient in the news coverage, it might be the case that Chile's Estallido Social does not necessarily fit the existing protest categories. More than "a protest," the Chilean case was a "protest process" where each day was different from the previous one, and many aspects of social life were affected by this process. Consequently, when covering protests as a socio-political process, the coverage focused on the riots, the debates, the spectacle, and the conflict, but also reported on other dimensions that are not necessarily part of the existent theory. Similarly, the "other" category in generic frames echoes Gronemeyer et al.'s (2020) call to include an "informative" generic frame, also based on the context of the study. As previously explained, the context where protest movements take place is important in explaining protest coverage (e.g., Kilgo, 2020; Kilgo & Mourão, 2021). Given the nature of the protest and its socio-historical context, the so-called Estallido Social might have challenged how the news media portrayed the event.

6. Conclusions

From our results, we were able to observe a direct relationship between generic frames and protest frames, in which the presence of the former seems to determine that of the latter. Protest frames focus on the presence of events and actions related to the demonstrations, while generic frames provide information about how the news media interpret and package the news. When analyzing both sets of frames together, the relationships between framing categories show that it is possible to study them from a mixed-frame approach, following Kozman's (2017) proposal.

Even though we observed elements of the traditional protest coverage (e.g., the exaltation of violence, protesters presented as deviants, etc.), it is important to acknowledge the nature of the protest, and the socio-historical context might impact how the media portray the event. Moreover, it can transgress the traditional categories of framing by making salient aspects that are not considered in the original theories (as shown in the Other and Does Not Apply categories).

This study is not without limitations. First, our analysis relied on a single news provider, and as such, we cannot draw general conclusions about the country's media system as a whole. We analyzed news stories published on Radio Bío Bío's Facebook page because Radio Bío Bío is the most trusted news outlet in the country, and also because Chilean audiences rely mostly on social media (particularly Facebook) to get informed. While most framing research looking at Chilean protest has analyzed print news coverage, there is limited research looking at other types of news media that reach larger audiences. Thus, we looked at the Facebook page of a respected and highly consumed news source (Newman et al., 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). Yet, more research is needed to compare protest news coverage across print, radio, television, and online, to achieve a more holistic understanding of news framing when it comes to covering protests.

The findings of this study show that combining both generic and issue-specific frames is a helpful approach to understanding the complexities of protest news coverage. We believe this mixed-frame approach is useful to make sense of frame functions such as defining problems or finding solutions (Entman, 1993), and also to observe how the public perceives protest movements. For instance, news coverage of violent demonstrations might use the riot frame but emphasizing economic consequences versus attribution of responsibility might have different effects on the audience. While identifying such effects is beyond the scope of this article, future research could apply an experimental design to test this possibility.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Conspiracy Beliefs, Misinformation, Social Media Platforms, and Protest Participation

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Abstract
Protest has long been associated with left-wing actors and left-wing causes. However, right-wing actors also engage in protest. Are right-wing actors mobilized by the same factors as those actors on the left? This article uses cross-national survey data (i.e., US, UK, France, and Canada) gathered in February 2021 to assess the role of misinformation, conspiracy beliefs, and the use of different social media platforms in explaining participation in marches or demonstrations. We find that those who use Twitch or TikTok are twice as likely to participate in marches or demonstrations, compared to non-users, but the uses of these platforms are more highly related to participation in right-wing protests than left-wing protests. Exposure to misinformation on social media and beliefs in conspiracy theories also increase the likelihood of participating in protests. Our research makes several important contributions. First, we separate right-wing protest participation from left-wing protest participation, whereas existing scholarship tends to lump these together. Second, we offer new insights into the effects of conspiracy beliefs and misinformation on participation using cross-national data. Third, we examine the roles of emerging social media platforms such as Twitch and TikTok (as well as legacy platforms such as YouTube and Facebook) to better understand the differential roles that social media platforms play in protest participation.

Keywords
conspiracy; cross-national; Facebook; misinformation; protest; social media; TikTok; Twitch; YouTube

Issue
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1. Introduction

Protest has long been associated with left-wing actors (Boulianne et al., 2019). Studies tend to focus on left-wing causes and actors, including the climate strike, Black Lives Matter, and women's rights (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, et al., 2020; Boulianne, Lalancette, et al., 2020; Fisher, 2018). However, right-wing protests are growing in number and size (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2016; Vüllers & Hellmeier, 2022). We do not know if right-wing actors are mobilized by the same factors as those on the left. On January 6, 2021, rioters stormed the Capitol Building in the US. This event led to a good deal of speculation about the role of misinformation, conspiracy beliefs, and social media in protest participation. In addition, there is ample debate about whether such events are specific to the US context or whether misinformation, conspiracy theories, and social media have consistent roles in protest in other political contexts.

We test these theories using a representative sample of citizens in four Western democracies (US, UK, France, and Canada). The survey data were gathered in February 2021 to examine the roles of misinformation, conspiracy beliefs, and the use of different social media platforms in explaining protest participation. We find that using Twitch or TikTok doubles the

odds of participating in marches or demonstrations. For those engaged in right-wing protests, using these platforms triples the odds of participating in marches or demonstrations. Conspiracy beliefs are significantly correlated with protest participation, but slightly more for those on the right than the left. Misinformation on social media relates to those who protest and have left-wing views, but misinformation on social media does not influence right-wing protest once conspiracy beliefs are considered in the multivariate regression model. In terms of cross-national differences, we find few variations in the roles of these key variables in protest participation, suggesting our model is robust across a variety of Western democratic contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Platforms and Protest Participation

Digital media have long been associated with protests and social movements (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Digital media reduce the costs of acquiring information and are also critical for their networking features which help individuals find and connect with like-minded groups. The newness of this technology can offer protesters a safe space to organize outside of state surveillance (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). However, this advantage is temporary as states (and sometimes corporations) can quickly adapt and then use a variety of overt and covert digital tactics to repress protest activities (Earl et al., 2022). Social media companies differ in their support or resistance to digital surveillance and repression on their sites (Earl et al., 2022). While the newness of the technology may intimidate older and less-skilled users, these new tools are easily picked up by a generation of youth who grew up using digital media. As such, digital media are particularly important for youth and youth mobilization (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020).

After more than 25 years (Boulianne, 2020), the role of digital media in civic and political participation has increased and expanded beyond youth. Nonetheless, the theory of emerging technology continues to be relevant for understanding how technology is used for protest participation. For example, in newer studies, the use of social media, a type of digital media, is correlated with protest participation (see a review of 17 studies in Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, et al., 2020). We use this theory of emerging technology to understand the rise of new social media platforms and how they relate to protest participation. Our core argument is that the newness of a platform will make it an attractive tool for protest organizations; as a result, we expect to see a positive correlation between the use of newer platforms and protest participation. This effect is further enabled by the youthfulness of the platform user group. Protest participation is more popular among young people compared to older people (Boulianne et al., 2019). The combination of youthful networks and youth-preferred forms of participation help explain correlations between social media use and protests.

We examine two emerging social media platforms, Twitch and TikTok, to compare how the use of these specific platforms differs from older social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and YouTube) in terms of protest participation. Few studies have compared platform-specific effects. Valenzuela et al. (2014) compare Twitter and Facebook, finding that Facebook has stronger effects on protest participation than Twitter, using a sample of Chilean youth. They explain these differences in terms of Facebook's stronger network ties compared to Twitter's weaker ties. In another study of Chile, they find that Facebook has a stronger effect on collective efficacy compared to Twitter, affirming the distinctiveness of these platforms in their effects on collective action (Halpern et al., 2017). Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, et al. (2020) also compare Facebook and Twitter using an American sample. They find that Twitter is a more consistent predictor of participation in marches or demonstrations, as well as participation in specific events (Women's March and March for Science). They explain these findings in terms of Twitter being composed of ties among political elites, news media, and social movement organizations (also see Yarchi et al., 2021). As such, the effects of specific platforms may depend on the national context.

TikTok and Twitch use is not widespread among the public. Recent Pew Research suggests that 12% of Americans use TikTok and 6% use Twitch (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). Both platforms are video-based platforms intended for entertainment—video game playing for Twitch and dancing on TikTok. In the 2020 US presidential election, young K-pop fans used TikTok to coordinate efforts to purchase tickets to a Trump rally, then pranked the organizers by not showing up to the event (Lorenz et al., 2020); but the youth had been using this platform to express their discontent with Trump even prior to this critical event (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). In 2020, activists used Twitch to document Black Lives Matter protests to counter the legacy media portrayals; the platform has also been used to fundraise in support of this cause (Browning, 2020). In Canada, the New Democratic Party (left-wing party) leader Jagmeet Singh and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (left-wing US congresswoman) squared off in a video game streamed on Twitch in November 2020. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez organized similar events on Twitch to connect with youth about politics in the lead-up to the 2020 US presidential election (Canadian Press, 2020). As such, these new platforms are being used by civic and political actors to mobilize citizens.

The video-based platforms are similar to YouTube, a legacy social media platform. As such, we might expect similarities in the roles of these platforms for protest participation. Early research suggests that the use of YouTube for campaign information did not influence offline participation in campaign activities in the 2012

US presidential election (Towner, 2013; Towner & Muñoz, 2018). However, this research was done when this platform was not new, and citizens' participation was measured in terms of campaign activities, rather than the youth-preferred protest participation.

Guinaudeau et al. (2021) compare TikTok and YouTube, pointing out their similarities in terms of algorithmic recommendations. Both platforms curate from what is popular on the site, as opposed to what is popular among one's network, and deliver curated content to users who do not have a registered account on the platform. Munger and Phillips (2022) claim that the algorithmic recommendations have favored right-wing content. They show that the posting and viewership of right-wing content have increased in the past few years. Their data suggest this is "the next step in a long line of attempts by both conservatives and the far-right to take advantage of emerging communications technologies" (Munger & Phillips, 2022, p. 190). Yet, academic research has focused on YouTube use for left-wing causes, including the Occupy Movement and the Kony 2012 campaign (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016; Thorson et al., 2013).

As such, we consider whether the role of these platforms may differ for right-wing versus left-wing participation in marches or demonstrations. Our examples about Twitch and TikTok relate to left-wing causes. The implications of these platforms on right-wing protests may be given less academic and media attention. Given the minimal research separating types of protest, we do not offer a hypothesis on this topic but propose a research question:

> H1: The use of new social media platforms (TikTok or Twitch) increases the likelihood of participation in marches or demonstrations.

> RQ1: To what extent does the use of new social media platforms differ with respect to their association with protest participation for those on the right versus the left?

2.2. Misinformation on Social Media and Protest Participation

Political knowledge scholarship suggests that, when it comes to knowledge about current events and affairs, people can be sorted into three categories: informed (holding factual information), uninformed (lacking factual information), and misinformed (holding factually inaccurate information without knowing so). Being informed has long been considered an antecedent of political participation (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Verba et al., 1995). When people know what is going on, they are more likely to get involved as they know they can get involved and, thus, contribute to political processes (Zaller, 1992). While some debates exist about how much knowledge one needs to participate in politics, scholars generally agree that people at least need to be somewhat informed to further engage in political processes (Verba et al., 1995).

Interestingly, the positive link established between political knowledge (being informed) and political participation also applies to misinformation (being misinformed) and political participation. Indeed, being misinformed is conceptually different from being uninformed (Kuklinski et al., 2000; White et al., 2006). While the latter means that people do not know what is going on (and thus may not be motivated to further engage in politics), misinformed individuals believe they are informed, but they confidently hold inaccurate information. Thus, logically speaking, the path of political knowledge to political participation can also apply to the path of misinformation to political participation (White et al., 2006), as one would still believe one knows enough (though it is often a false perception) to engage in political processes. In this context, recent studies report that one's self-perception of knowledge (subjective knowledge) is an important driver of political participation (Lee et al., 2022; Yamamoto & Yang, 2022). Furthermore, because misinformed individuals are likely to think that others are getting their facts wrong, they are likely to actively engage in politics to correct others and influence political processes (White et al., 2006). Scholars have indeed found that belief in false facts is associated with political participation (Lee, 2017; White et al., 2006), but other studies have not found misinformation and political participation to be significantly related (Valenzuela et al., 2019). We propose the following:

> H2: Self-assessed exposure to misinformation increases the likelihood of participation in marches or demonstrations.

2.3. Conspiracy Belief and Protest Participation

In addition to misinformation, another newly emerging factor that contributes to right-wing protest is a belief in conspiracy theories. While the role of conspiracy beliefs in right-wing protests has been discussed in the press and other reports (e.g., McCarthy, 2021; Program on Extremism, 2021), the empirical research linking these two remains relatively scarce.

Conspiracy theory refers to "an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good" (Uscinski, 2018, p. 235). The belief in conspiracy theories is harmful to democracy because it hampers rational political discussion and the decision-making process (McKay & Tenove, 2021). It also degrades trust in political institutions (Mari et al., 2022). Against this background, numerous studies focus on exploring the factors that predict conspiracy beliefs, such as right-wing ideology (e.g., Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Min, 2021; van Prooijen et al., 2015; Walter & Drochon, 2020) and right-wing authoritarianism (e.g., Hartman et al.,

2021; Swami, 2012). Despite a plethora of research on "antecedents" of conspiracy beliefs, less research exists on the "consequences" of such beliefs.

Many studies find that endorsing conspiracy beliefs is negatively associated with *conventional* political participation activities (e.g., Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Uscinski & Parent, 2014), as conspiracy theories tend to view the "political system and its institutions as part of a wider network of conspirators engaged in malevolent activities" (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020, p. 553). Studies also find that endorsing conspiracy beliefs positively correlates with support for or willingness to engage in illegal, violent, or non-institutional political behaviors such as protests (Imhoff et al., 2021; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Vegetti & Littvay, 2022). While little empirical research exists on conspiracy beliefs and actual engagement in protest behavior (rather than "intention for engagement"; cf. Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020), we propose the following hypothesis:

> H3: Holding conspiracy beliefs increases the likelihood of participation in marches or demonstrations.

While we expect misinformation and conspiracy beliefs to be associated with protest participation, such effects are likely to be more pronounced among those who identify as right-wing. That is because misinformation and/or conspiracy theories tend to be endorsed by right-wingers (Douglas et al., 2015; van Prooijen et al., 2015). Studies also find that exposure to or belief in misinformation and/or conspiracy theories tend to be positively correlated with support for right-wing populist parties (e.g., Hameleers, 2021; van Kessel et al., 2021). To be clear, we are neither arguing that all misinformation/conspiracy theories are right-wing oriented nor that left-wing people are immune to misinformation stories/conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen et al., 2015). Rather, the link between misinformation or conspiracy beliefs and protest participation may differ for those on the right compared to those on the left. We propose a research question:

> RQ2: To what extent do misinformation and conspiracy beliefs differ in their association with protest participation for those on the right versus the left?

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

Our study draws on the results of a survey administered to an online panel by Lightspeed Kantar Group in February 2021. Our full sample includes 6,068 respondents from four countries: Canada (n = 1,568), the UK (n = 1,500), France (n = 1,500), and the US (n = 1,500). We employed quotas to ensure the composition of the online panel matched census data for each country (for a direct comparison of sample and official statistics, see Boulianne, 2022). The survey was administered in both English and French in Canada, in English in the UK and US, and in French in France. The project was approved (File No. 101856) in accordance with Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

3.2. Measures

Table 1 outlines the descriptive statistics for each variable as well as the question wording and response options. For platform use, misinformation exposure, and ideology, we recoded the original response options to create dummy variables. The approach matches theories and existing research as well as addresses skewed response distributions. In terms of cross-national differences, the largest differences relate to political interest, identifying as right-wing, holding conspiracy views, and participating in marches or demonstrations. US respondents report the highest averages for political interest and holding conspiracy views (cf. Walter & Drochon, 2020) compared to other countries. In this sample, there are more right-wing Americans than right-wing citizens in other countries. Canadian respondents were more trusting of their government compared to respondents in other countries (also see Edelman, 2021). Finally, respondents from France were the most likely to report having participated in a march or demonstration (also see Vassallo & Ding, 2016). For protests on the right versus left, we created this variable using a combination of political ideology and participation in marches or demonstrations. If participants identified as left-wing and reported protesting, they were coded as one on this variable (all others are zero). If the participants identified as right-wing and reported protesting, they were coded as one (others are coded as zero).

4. Findings

Table 2 presents the bivariate correlations among all variables. The bivariate correlations show that use of either Twitch (r = 0.274, p < 0.001) or TikTok (r = 0.272, p < 0.001) is significantly correlated with protest participation (Table 2). The uses of these two platforms are the strongest correlates of participation in marches or demonstrations. These variables matter more than conspiracy beliefs, exposure to misinformation, age, political interest, or political ideology.

The bivariate correlations also show that self-assessed exposure to misinformation on social media is correlated with the uses of these two platforms (r = 0.202 and 0.253, respectively; p < 0.001). However, of the four social media platforms, Facebook use is the most strongly correlated with exposure to misinformation on social media (r = 0.414, p < 0.001). Conspiracy beliefs and misinformation on social media are weakly and positively correlated (r = 0.048, p < 0.001). Conspiracy beliefs are negatively correlated with trust in government (r = −0.076, p < 0.001). In addition, the uses of these

Table 1. Descriptive statistics by country.

	Min–Max	All	US	UK	France	Canada
Education *(Bachelor's degree or more)*	0 or 1	33%	39%	34%	26%	32%
Females	0 or 1	51%	51%	49%	51%	52%
Age	18–97	48.33 (17.37)	48.36 (18.69)	48.11 (17.03)	48.50 (16.30)	48.37 (17.40)
In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?						
0 to 3 are left-wing	0 or 1	18%	17%	16%	19%	21%.
7 to 10 are right-wing	0 or 1	26%	35%	25%	25%	19%
How interested would you say you are in politics? (*not at all*, *not very*, *fairly*, *very*)	1–4	2.52 (0.96)	2.73 (0.99)	2.51 (0.94)	2.29 (0.97)	2.54 (0.91)
During the past 12 months, how often have you used the following sites, apps, or services?						
Twitch	0 or 1	18%	23%	15%	18%	17%
TikTok	0 or 1	25%	28%	24%	21%	26%
YouTube	0 or 1	86%	81%	87%	86%	90%
Facebook	0 or 1	80%	77%	77%	81%	85%
How much confidence, if any, do you have in each of the following to act in the best interests of the public? National/federal government (*not at all*, *a little*, *a moderate amount*, *a lot*, *a great deal*)	1–5	2.19 (1.14)	2.30 (1.20)	2.04 (1.06)	2.05 (1.12)	2.36 (1.13)
Conspiracy beliefs*	1–4	3.01	3.13	2.94	3.06	2.94
(a) I think many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about;		(0.66)	(0.66)	(0.64)	(0.65)	(0.65)
(b) I think that politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions;						
(c) I think that there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions. (*Strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree*, *strongly agree*)						
The next questions will ask about misinformation on social media. By misinformation, we mean false or misleading information. In the past month, how often on social media have you seen someone share misinformation?	0 or 1	70%	73%	67%	66%	74%
During the past 12 months, have you done any of the following activities offline:						
(a) Participated in a march or street demonstration;	0 or 1	11%	12%	7%	16%	7%
(b) Left-wing protest created based on yes to both protest and left-wing ideology;	0 or 1	3%	3%	2%	5%	2%
(c) Right-wing protest created based on yes to both protest and right-wing ideology	0 or 1	4%	6%	3%	4%	2%

Notes: * The source of conspiracy belief measures are Bruder et al. (2013) and Halpern et al. (2019); reliability is 0.768 for the full sample, 0.746 for the US, 0.772 for the UK, 0.756 for France, and 0.768 for Canada.

Table 2. Correlation matrix.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Protest (1)	*r* *p*															
Twitch (2)	0.274 <0.001															
TikTok (3)	0.272 <0.001	0.522 <0.001														
YouTube (4)	0.097 <0.001	0.156 <0.001	0.206 <0.001													
Facebook (5)	0.083 <0.001	0.126 <0.001	0.179 <0.001	0.251 <0.001												
Trust in government (6)	0.209 <0.001	0.269 <0.001	0.245 <0.001	0.125 <0.001	0.099 <0.001											
Conspiracy beliefs (7)	0.060 <0.001	−0.032 0.012	−0.009 0.482	0.041 0.002	0.041 0.001	−0.076 <0.001										
Misinformation (8)	0.125 <0.001	0.202 <0.001	0.253 <0.001	0.230 <0.001	0.414 <0.001	0.129 <0.001	0.048 <0.001									
Bachelor's degree (9)	0.063 <0.001	0.076 <0.001	0.038 0.003	0.037 0.004	−0.011 0.382	0.146 <0.001	−0.072 <0.001	0.040 0.002								
Females (10)	−0.056 <0.001	−0.118 <0.001	0.021 0.098	−0.008 0.531	0.066 <0.001	−0.071 <0.001	0.014 0.262	0.038 0.003	−0.004 0.731							
Age (11)	−0.187 <0.001	−0.416 <0.001	−0.468 <0.001	−0.227 <0.001	−0.153 <0.001	−0.131 <0.001	0.086 <0.001	−0.231 <0.001	−0.029 0.023	−0.104 <0.001						
France (12)	0.093 <0.001	−0.004 0.734	−0.048 <0.001	−0.001 0.957	0.013 0.293	−0.069 <0.001	0.039 0.003	−0.057 <0.001	−0.082 <0.001	0.001 0.916	0.005 0.676					
UK (13)	−0.060 <0.001	−0.043 0.001	−0.010 0.457	0.022 0.080	−0.048 <0.001	−0.076 <0.001	−0.067 <0.001	−0.035 0.007	0.016 0.221	−0.020 0.125	−0.007 0.563	−0.328 <0.001				
Canada (14)	−0.061 <0.001	−0.020 0.114	0.010 0.440	0.065 <0.001	0.075 <0.001	0.089 <0.001	−0.070 <0.001	0.054 <0.001	−0.007 0.573	0.014 0.262	0.001 0.918	−0.338 <0.001	−0.338 <0.001			
Political interest (15)	0.164 <0.001	0.123 <0.001	0.097 <0.001	0.078 <0.001	0.004 0.733	0.325 <0.001	0.038 0.003	0.110 <0.001	0.189 <0.001	−0.177 <0.001	0.121 <0.001	−0.134 <0.001	−0.004 0.773	0.012 0.361		
Right-wing (16)	0.083 <0.001	0.139 <0.001	0.085 <0.001	−0.011 0.400	0.025 0.048	0.108 <0.001	0.116 <0.001	0.026 0.046	0.069 <0.001	−0.087 <0.001	0.033 0.009	−0.011 0.390	−0.010 0.458	−0.092 <0.001	0.204 <0.001	
Left-wing (17)	0.086 <0.001	−0.037 0.004	−0.012 0.353	0.062 <0.001	0.010 0.419	0.045 <0.001	−0.044 0.001	0.062 <0.001	0.074 <0.001	0.018 0.163	−0.011 0.375	0.010 0.453	−0.038 0.003	0.044 0.001	0.156 <0.001	−0.281 <0.001

platforms are highly correlated with age. Older people are far less likely to use these two platforms compared to young people (r = −0.416 and −0.468, respectively; p < 0.001). Older people are far less likely to report being exposed to misinformation on social media compared to young people (r = −0.231, p < 0.001).

Moving on to the multivariate models (Table 3), we find that using Twitch (ExpB = 1.91, p < 0.001) and TikTok (ExpB = 2.31, p < 0.001) doubles the odds of participating in a march or demonstration (H1). In contrast, the use of legacy social media (YouTube or Facebook) does not relate to the likelihood of protest participation. Being exposed to misinformation on social media (ExpB = 1.41, p = 0.014) and holding conspiracy beliefs (ExpB = 1.42, p < 0.001) increase the odds of protest participation (H2, H3).

Do these variables matter more for protesting on the right versus protesting on the left? We find that Twitch (ExpB = 3.30, p < 0.001) and TikTok (ExpB = 3.26, p < 0.001) uses are more highly related to protest among right-wing citizens (RQ1). For those engaged in right-wing protests, using Twitch or TikTok triples the odds of participating in a march or demonstration. The use of YouTube is more strongly related to protest on the left compared to the right (ExpB = 2.34, p = 0.024); in contrast, the use of Facebook is more strongly related to protest on the right compared to the left (ExpB = 2.10, p = 0.026). Importantly, when we aggregate right- and left-wing protests (Table 3, first model), we find no relationship between legacy social media platforms and protest. These significant relationships are observed when the data are disaggregated into left- versus right-wing protests.

Conspiracy beliefs are significantly correlated with right-wing citizens' participation in marches or demonstrations (ExpB = 1.59, p < 0.001), but these beliefs do not have a significant role with left-wing protesters. Self-assessed exposure to misinformation on social media relates to left-wing protesters (ExpB = 1.69, p = 0.021), but misinformation on social media does not influence right-wing protest once conspiracy beliefs are considered in the multivariate regression model (RQ2).

Cross-national differences are apparent with respect to participation in marches or demonstrations. Respondents from France are more likely to participate in marches or demonstrations compared to respondents from the US (ExpB = 2.58, p < 0.001). Respondents from the UK and Canada do not differ from respondents from the US in terms of the likelihood of participating in protests. For left- versus right-wing protests, France respondents are more likely to participate in left-wing protests compared to US respondents (ExpB = 3.37, p < 0.001). Canadian respondents are far less likely to participate in right-wing marches compared to US respondents (ExpB = 0.51, p = 0.003).

We borrow a narrative from the US context and test this narrative about conspiracy beliefs, misinformation, and protest using a cross-national sample. Table 4 presents our models for each of the countries. We find

Table 3. Logistic regression of participation in marches or demonstrations.

	Participate in any marches or demonstrations in the past 12 months (pooled)				Right-wing and participate in marches				Left-wing and participate in marches			
	b	*SE*	ExpB	*p*-value	*b*	*SE*	ExpB	*p*-value	*b*	*SE*	ExpB	*p*-value
Twitch	0.65	0.12	1.91	< 0.001	1.19	0.20	3.30	< 0.001	−0.48	0.22	0.62	0.033
TikTok	0.84	0.12	2.31	< 0.001	1.18	0.22	3.26	< 0.001	0.51	0.20	1.67	0.013
YouTube	0.35	0.22	1.43	0.101	−0.15	0.37	0.86	0.697	0.85	0.38	2.34	0.024
Facebook	0.12	0.15	1.12	0.442	0.74	0.33	2.10	0.026	−0.23	0.23	0.80	0.322
Trust in government	0.25	0.04	1.28	< 0.001	0.47	0.07	1.60	< 0.001	−0.05	0.07	0.95	0.513
Conspiracy beliefs	0.35	0.08	1.42	< 0.001	0.47	0.13	1.59	< 0.001	0.15	0.12	1.16	0.230
Misinformation	0.34	0.14	1.41	0.014	−0.05	0.24	0.95	0.826	0.52	0.23	1.69	0.021
Bachelor's degree	0.13	0.10	1.14	0.170	0.11	0.15	1.12	0.473	0.26	0.16	1.29	0.110
Females	−0.23	0.10	0.79	0.017	−0.25	0.16	0.78	0.108	0.04	0.16	1.05	0.783
Age	−0.02	0.00	0.98	< 0.001	0.00	0.01	1.00	0.511	−0.01	0.01	0.99	0.014
France	0.95	0.13	2.58	< 0.001	0.28	0.20	1.32	0.161	1.21	0.21	3.37	< 0.001
UK	−0.13	0.14	0.88	0.366	−0.09	0.21	0.91	0.669	−0.09	0.26	0.92	0.739
Canada	−0.26	0.14	0.77	0.063	−0.68	0.23	0.51	0.003	−0.02	0.25	0.98	0.938
Political interest	0.40	0.06	1.49	< 0.001	0.44	0.10	1.55	< 0.001	0.67	0.10	1.96	< 0.001
Right-wing	0.28	0.12	1.32	0.016								
Left-wing	0.84	0.12	2.33	< 0.001								
Model information	n = 6,034 Cox & Snell R-square = 0.133				n = 6,035 Cox & Snell R-square = 0.092				n = 6,035 Cox & Snell R-square = 0.025			

Note: Reference group are males, no post-secondary education, moderate or center, and from the US.

Table 4. Logistic regression of participation in marches or demonstrations for each country.

	US				UK			
	b	*SE*	ExpB	*p*-value	*b*	*SE*	ExpB	*p*-value
Twitch	0.81	0.25	2.24	0.001	0.62	0.30	1.86	0.038
TikTok	0.98	0.26	2.65	< 0.001	0.99	0.29	2.68	0.001
YouTube	−0.06	0.43	0.94	0.895	0.09	0.56	1.10	0.871
Facebook	0.19	0.32	1.21	0.561	0.40	0.40	1.49	0.317
Trust in government	0.34	0.08	1.40	< 0.001	0.47	0.11	1.61	< 0.001
Conspiracy beliefs	0.17	0.16	1.18	0.288	0.21	0.20	1.23	0.307
Misinformation	0.20	0.33	1.22	0.555	1.10	0.43	2.99	0.012
Bachelor's degree	0.37	0.20	1.45	0.065	0.31	0.23	1.36	0.189
Females	−0.15	0.21	0.86	0.470	−0.26	0.24	0.77	0.292
Age	−0.03	0.01	0.97	< 0.001	−0.02	0.01	0.98	0.055
Political interest	0.66	0.13	1.94	< 0.001	0.40	0.15	1.49	0.008
Right-wing	0.29	0.23	1.33	0.215	0.46	0.28	1.58	0.104
Left-wing	0.49	0.27	1.64	0.065	1.18	0.30	3.25	< 0.001
Model information	n = 1,490; Cox & Snell R-square = 0.212				n = 1,490; Cox & Snell R-square = 0.139			
	France				Canada			
	b	*SE*	ExpB	*p*-value	*b*	*SE*	ExpB	*p*-value
Twitch	0.55	0.22	1.73	0.013	0.48	0.25	1.62	0.052
TikTok	0.80	0.21	2.23	< 0.001	0.65	0.25	1.92	0.008
YouTube	0.73	0.34	2.08	0.030	0.21	0.55	1.23	0.700
Facebook	−0.07	0.23	0.93	0.754	0.05	0.39	1.05	0.903
Trust in government	0.17	0.07	1.18	0.025	0.17	0.10	1.19	0.067
Conspiracy beliefs	0.46	0.13	1.58	< 0.001	0.21	0.17	1.24	0.202
Misinformation	0.23	0.19	1.26	0.224	0.59	0.37	1.81	0.106
Bachelor's degree	−0.07	0.18	0.93	0.703	0.17	0.22	1.18	0.445
Females	−0.27	0.16	0.77	0.098	−0.31	0.21	0.74	0.152
Age	0.00	0.01	1.00	0.697	−0.03	0.01	0.97	< 0.001
Political interest	0.34	0.09	1.40	< 0.001	0.26	0.13	1.29	0.054
Right-wing	0.06	0.20	1.06	0.773	0.18	0.27	1.19	0.512
Left-wing	1.18	0.19	3.24	< 0.001	0.20	0.25	1.22	0.421
Model information	n = 1,494; Cox & Snell R-square = 0.115				n = 1,560; Cox & Snell R-square = 0.078			

few variations in the roles of these key variables in protest participation. In all country-specific models, Twitch or TikTok use double the odds of protest participation (H1). Aside from YouTube use in France (ExpB = 2.08, $p = 0.030$), none of the tests of legacy platforms is statistically significant. Self-assessed exposure to misinformation is a significant predictor of protest in the UK (ExpB = 2.99, $p = 0.012$) but not in other countries (H2). Finally, conspiracy beliefs are a significant predictor of protest in France (ExpB = 1.58, $p < 0.001$) but not in other countries (H3).

5. Discussion

Digital media have long been associated with protest and social movements because of the lower costs of acquiring information as well as networking features that enable like-minded people to connect and then organize into collective action. Newer technologies have benefits for collective action in that their newness may help reduce digital surveillance and repression. While prior studies have established that social media and protest participation are correlated, this study builds on knowledge about platform-specific effects (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, et al., 2020; Valenzuela et al., 2014). Twitch and TikTok are newer platforms compared to Facebook and YouTube. This newness, as well as the youthful user groups who are predisposed towards alternative forms of civic participation, make these platforms ideal for coordinating collective action outside state surveillance. Academic literature (Literat

& Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019) and news media coverage (Browning, 2020; Lorenz et al., 2020) discuss the potential of these platforms for left-wing causes. We examine whether these platforms also have implications for right-wing causes. Indeed, we find that the use of these platforms triples the odds of participation in protest for those on the right. These greater effects support Munger and Phillips's (2022) claim that conservatives are taking advantage of new communication technologies to mobilize their supporters. Scholarship tends to be biased towards studying social media and left-wing causes (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, et al., 2020; Boulianne, Lalancette, et al., 2020; Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016; Thorson et al., 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2014), but the potential of social media to inform and connect extends beyond these causes. In the case of TikTok and Twitch, those who identify as right-wing may be mobilized more so than those on the left. This finding is replicated in a representative online panel in four different Western democracies.

We also find that use of these platforms is a stronger predictor of protest participation than (self-assessed) exposure to misinformation on social media or holding conspiracy beliefs. While these factors increase the odds of protest participation, their roles are relatively small. We find that conspiracy beliefs are slightly more important for those on the right compared to those on the left, whereas exposure to misinformation is slightly more important for those on the left compared to those on the right. We show that the roles of conspiracy beliefs and exposure to misinformation on protest participation are quite consistent across the four countries studied.

While scholars have long argued that political knowledge increases political participation (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Verba et al., 1995), we find that self-assessed exposure to misinformation also increases participation. Believing false information could increase political participation (Lee, 2017; White et al., 2006), but this participation is motivated by flawed information. This pattern has serious implications for citizens and democracy. In particular, citizens may advocate for policies and support candidates who are, in fact, contrary to their best interests. While there is concern about this occurring on the right (e.g., Trump supporters), the survey findings suggest that this could also be an issue on the left (Imhoff et al., 2022).

Our study also considered the role of conspiracy beliefs and how these beliefs relate to protest participation. Conspiracy beliefs play a larger role for those who are right-wing and engage in protest. Our findings offer support for media narratives and descriptive research about the role of conspiracy beliefs in right-wing protests, e.g., the January 6th insurrection. As mentioned, holding conspiracy beliefs is harmful to democracy because it hampers rational political discussion and the decision-making process (McKay & Tenove, 2021) and degrades trust in political institutions (Mari et al., 2022). As illustrated by other research (e.g., Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Walter & Drochon, 2020), this issue is greater for those with right-wing ideologies. We have addressed a clear research gap in understanding how conspiracy beliefs correlate with protest participation (cf. Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020). Our research also addresses important gaps in the roles of different platforms, conspiracy beliefs, and exposure to misinformation on social media in the protest mobilization process in four countries.

We suggest several topics for further research. First, while scholarship on protest has treated social media as a predictor of protest (see literature review in Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, et al., 2020), we consider the relationship to be reciprocal in that social media can mobilize, but its use can also be an outcome. Protesters can use social media to document their participation in protest events (Boulianne, Lalancette, et al., 2020). In the case of police brutality in managing protests, protesters can use social media to document these events. Further research could employ a multi-wave panel to consider the reciprocal relationship using structural equation modeling. In addition, considering TikTok and Twitch, new research could consider what types of recruitment messages are effective in mobilizing platform users. Additional research could also examine the types of social ties cultivated on TikTok and Twitch and how these network features impact protest participation, as social media platforms' effects have been theorized in terms of network structures (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, et al., 2020; Valenzuela et al., 2014). Yarchi et al. (2021) offer a useful framework for comparing platforms in terms of their network features, use of algorithms, and ability to construct group identities. While they compare Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp groups, this framework would be useful for understanding TikTok and Twitch. While we found similarities in TikTok and Twitch's effects, which supports our theory of newness, the differences between YouTube and Facebook compared to TikTok and Twitch may be explained by platform-specific affordances.

In addition, we propose new lines of research about misinformation and conspiracy beliefs. Specifically for misinformation, additional research should examine what types of fake news stories circulate on the different platforms (similar to Halpern et al., 2019; Valenzuela et al., 2019) and which types of fake news stories mobilize people to participate in unconventional political activities. In this article, we rely on self-reported exposure to misinformation, which is a limitation. We do not know for certain if the respondents viewed misinformation on social media. However, assessing the accuracy of exposure is tangential; if respondents believe they were exposed to misinformation and act accordingly, then misinformation becomes real in its outcomes (protest participation). For conspiracy beliefs, a line of questioning could explore some nuances about the agencies and actors involved in cover-ups and deception. Are these entities local, national, or international? Do these entities include government, multi-national corporations, or

media? We suspect that the choice of political activities may depend on who is implicated in these conspiracy theories.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Replication and data files are available at: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.20632605.v1

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Article

Far-Right Digital Activism in Polarized Contexts: A Comparative Analysis of Engagement in Hashtag Wars

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Abstract
Literature on influence operations highlights the coordinated actions of digital activists aimed at persuading audiences. Scholars have discussed many angles of this behavior and emphasized repertoires based on specific contentious actions. However, little is discussed about how these disputes allow us to apprehend different models of political action in polarized contexts. On a whole, studies have not considered a broader understanding of digital activism performed by supporters of far-right governments. How does the far-right spread its agenda and support the government in "hashtag wars"? What kind of strategies are employed? This study seeks to compare patterns of coordinated behavior in hashtags created by supporters and detractors of the Bolsonaro government in Brazil that occupied the trending topics on Twitter. The statistical analysis is based on 6.1 million tweets taken from 20 political hashtags collected over a three-month period from May to July 2020. Data was scraped using Twitter's Search API v3.0 for academic use. We analyzed the overall volume and peaks of tweets, the users they engaged with, and their network of influence, as well as the length of each hashtag. The results show an intense use of hashtag activism by Bolsonaro supporters, with users struggling for greater prominence in social media in the face of political events in Brazil. This article sheds light on how the far-right appropriates digital platforms to promote the government's public image in times of political tension and how it promotes coordinated actions aimed at framing social media audiences.

Keywords
astroturfing; digital activism; far-rights; hashtag wars; Jair Bolsonaro; political polarization

Issue
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1. Introduction

"Hashtag wars" on Twitter have gained considerable prominence as one of the repertoires used by activist groups (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Goswami, 2018; Recuero et al., 2015). In highly polarized political environments, disputes often occur between interest groups, both in support of or in opposition to certain agendas or certain politicians (Ozaydin, 2021; Papacharissi & Fatima-Oliveira, 2012). This not only provides greater visibility to highly engaged audiences but also allows new audiences to join the actions carried out by an articulated group.

Study for this article aimed at exploring the features of political hashtags for trending topics on Twitter in Brazil during a three-month period, from May to July 2020. All hashtags analyzed were either in favor of or in opposition to Jair Bolsonaro's far-right government. As such, by comparing far-right hashtags with oppositional hashtags, this study seeks to show how these actions are distinguished and to what extent it is possible,

based on these differences, to identify political practices concerning these political-ideological spectrums.

Our research seeks to compare patterns of coordinated behavior in hashtags created by supporters and detractors of the Bolsonaro government in Brazil. The analysis is based on a sample of 6.1 million tweets within 20 political hashtags. We analyzed the overall volume and peaks of tweets, the users they engaged with, and their network of influence, as well as the length of each hashtag.

The results unveil the formation of ideological and homophilic bubbles composed of highly engaged militants which can contribute to distorting the public debate, giving visibility to certain agendas, to the detriment of others. In this sense, far-right hashtags are much better articulated and rise much faster than oppositional hashtags, suggesting that Jair Bolsonaro supporters have been able to incorporate the platform's affordances much more effectively and efficiently.

2. History and Origin of Hashtags on Twitter

Objectively speaking, hashtags can be defined as "sociotechnical networks" (Omena et al., 2020) that represent discourses, audiences, and communities, identifying conversations through marked messages (Recuero et al., 2015; van den Berg, 2014) and making them searchable (Scott, 2015). The first known use of hashtags on Twitter occurred in 2007. The idea, as explained by Bruns and Burgess (2011), was to create a content aggregation mechanism to generate groups and subgroups with shared interests. Messina (2007) proposed the hash symbol (#) to work as a content aggregator on Twitter, as a way to follow events in real-time (Scott, 2015).

Two years later, the platform itself adopted the feature. Its success was partly due to the ease with which the mechanism could be activated and widely used, "with the internal cross-referencing of hashtags into search results and trending topics" (Bruns & Burgess, 2011, p. 3). Although there are no further details on how the trending topic algorithm works, it is known that not only the number of tweets but the number of tweets in a specific time interval is important to trend (Twitter, 2022).

Bruns and Burgess (2011) explain that hashtags are also used to give visibility to some publications by attaching them to a larger topic. Burgess and Baym (2020) also argue that it became common for activist groups to hijack (or "hash-jack") some hashtags, hitching a ride on trending topics to opportunistically draw attention to distinct agendas.

It is an indexing system that allows quick retrieval of previously tagged content and denotes meanings attributed through the conversation (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Bruns and Burgess (2011) believe that the use of hashtags in these circumstances has decisively shaped a particular mode of civic participation and the hashtag thus has become a powerful tool for increasing the reach of political and social statements.

3. Hashtag Activism

The increasing dispute for online attention made digital strategies such as hashtag activism a key component to social movements (Santos & Reis, 2022). The idea of hashtag activism first appeared in the English newspaper *The Guardian* in 2011 during one of the most impactful events in digital politics, the Occupy Wall Street movement (Goswami, 2018). The protesters used the hashtag to organize the movement's information, thus creating a model of activism that was consolidated in digital environments with essential characteristics for any activist movement: bottom-up approach, facilitated organization process, collaborative mobilization, support for resources, and information coordination (Mueller et al., 2021). Since then, various movements around the world have gained strength and reach, represented by hashtags such as #MeToo, #ArabSpring, #TahirSquare, #BlackLivesMatter, #UmbrellaRevolution, and #ForaBolsonaro.

3.1. Social Movements and Hashtags Activism

Studies cover the relation between online mechanisms and political engagement (Badouard, 2013; Bennet & Segerberg, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Valenzuela, 2013) and the topic has gained particular interest in the scientific field since 2010 (Gomes, 2018). Hashtag activism has reshaped the repertoires of some social movements, bringing not only the emergence of a new sociability, but the issue of individual versus collective actions, the temporality and spatiality of the movements, and the connections between online and offline (Santos, 2019), not to mention the dispute for social visibility and influence.

Mainstream news media concentrate and converge their coverage on a particular issue over a certain period, and then subsequently decrease that coverage in favor of another emerging issue (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1995). On the other hand, social media, by allowing a large number of people to publish information, concentrates on new forms of mediation, dynamics of self-communication (Castells, 2009), and personal publics (Schmidt, 2014) being exposed to self-mediated content (Cammaerts & Jiménez-Martínez, 2014). Interest groups quickly noticed these changes and appropriated the platform's affordances. Hashtags were then incorporated, not so much as a mechanism of interpersonal communication but more as a repertoire of collective action.

3.2. Astroturfing and Hashtags

Since Twitter trending topics have become a window of opportunity for social movements and activist groups looking to give visibility to their agendas, the dispute for audience attention has intensified the use of persuasive techniques anchored in what scholars describe as astroturfing (Howard, 2006), influence operations (Friedberg & Donovan, 2019), inauthentic behavior

(Martini et al., 2021), or computational propaganda (Woolley & Howard, 2018). These expressions require a coordinated effort that may or may not make use of botnets, cyborgs, or troll armies, the main objective of which is to "achieve a specific effect among a target audience" (Thomas et al., 2020).

The use of bots to raise hashtags has been noted in literature for at least half a decade (Arnaudo, 2017). However, although much of this literature is concerned with identifying these bots and containing their harmful effects, little has been discussed about the role of online militias in the public debate, which often takes on a dissimulated and covert nature. Reis (2015, p. 23) defines astroturfing as a political action based on the "staged manifestation of an audience." This definition shows that, more than automated accounts, sock-puppets, click farms, or ordinary users with high political engagement, the real problem for the public sphere is the deceptive aspect that these actions instill, giving a small number of highly articulated actors the ability to become representatives of a public agenda.

3.3. Hashtag Wars

As a result of the appropriation of Twitter affordances, hashtag wars can be understood as discursive struggles for the meaning of political or social objects (Soares & Recuero, 2021) which seek to engage as many users as possible, gain visibility on the network, and become hegemonic. Social movement literature highlights at least three essential factors for contentious actions to be successful. The first is the very definition of a social movement, which is described as a "persistent and intentional effort" (Jasper, 2014) that differs from isolated events. This means that the *engagement* of individuals needs to be at a level above casual involvement.

Furthermore, studies also draw attention to how protesters promote their causes in arenas that constitute "opportunity structures" (Jasper, 2014) and develop "opportunistic" strategies (Gerbaudo, 2017) to achieve greater *visibility*. Literature on political mediatization has also claimed that social movements are drawing on new media to dispute this visibility space (Schulz, 2014).

Lastly, for protesting groups to become politically relevant it is highly important that they create coalitions and alliances, even if precarious (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010). These coalitions allow social movements to express greater political *plurality* and reinforce the importance of their agendas to a larger audience.

These three keys also seem to guide political actions in the digital environment. To a large extent, hashtag wars are also competitions to broaden audiences, engage more users, and achieve greater exposure. This means that occupying Twitter's trending topics has a strategic role.

As a form of digital activism, hashtag wars have been established as strategic practices which are often coordinated and covert—such as an astroturfing campaign. Fadillah et al. (2020) explain that this occurs because there are groups that want to influence other members of the political community, to alter the viewpoints of others on a certain subject.

Hashtag wars are addressed in literature in different ways, but they all analyze how hashtags help to increase activism in terms of visibility, engagement, and plurality. These issues are generally highlighted in electoral contexts, as is the case of disputes over campaign strategies (Ozaydin, 2021). Elections also reveal another side to the phenomenon: Scholars have argued that disputed hashtags often place mainstream media and hyperpartisan news on opposing sides, highlighting the role of misinformation in contexts of high engagement, as was the case in Brazil during the 2018 elections (Soares & Recuero, 2021). Activist groups have called this type of practice the "dispute of narratives," a definition that emphasizes the character of framing confrontations (Wan Hassan, 2016). However, despite the notoriety of this phenomenon, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that focus solely on multisite and cross-case analyses to compare the behavior of different hashtags during a cycle of confrontation.

4. Hashtag Wars and the Brazilian Far-Right

Literature on far-right propaganda used on digital platforms in the face of the cultural and political backlash experienced in different parts of the world has been growing in recent years (Fielitz & Marcks, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Some studies show that not only is there a transnational articulation between these extremist movements (Caiani & Kröll, 2015), but it is the far-right that invests the most in polarization strategies on social media (Darius & Stephani, 2020).

A number of scholars have drawn attention to recurring repertoires used by far-right supporters, such as online brigades and disinformation campaigns (Benkler et al., 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017); however, few studies compare the online performance of government supporters and government detractors in countries ruled by the far-right. In these contexts, hashtag wars take on a new shape. Firstly because the demonstrations are not limited to criticizing the government, they also support it, an unusual behavior among protesters. Secondly, hashtag statements are not just about moral agendas, they are also about the government's public image. One can often find explicit enunciative hashtags that support or criticize the government. Thirdly, this type of contentious action relies, to a large extent, on the participation of agents from the professional field of politics and individuals in public office, many of whom mobilize their electorate to engage. Lastly, government supporters' hashtags, different from traditional social movements, tend to speak only to the converted. These actions are not aimed at gathering new audiences and achieving greater plurality, they are only used to demonstrate strength.

The Brazilian case is notable because, since his election, Bolsonaro has outlined a strategy that favors

digital platforms over advertising in traditional media, such as television. With the very intense use of mobile messaging services and a large network of supporters distributed by political discussion groups in applications such as WhatsApp (Chagas, 2022), the so-called Bolsonarist network gained notoriety for disputing spaces for visibility on digital platforms through a pool of highly engaged supporters. Making use of a cross-platform operation, connecting WhatsApp groups with YouTuber channels, influencers on Facebook and Instagram, and online brigades on Twitter, materializing what Chadwick (2013) calls a hybrid media system, users who are part of this network tend to respond quickly to calls to action and actively participate in collective actions.

4.1. Bolsonaro's Office of Hate

Bolsonaro's 2018 campaign in Brazil was widely accused of spreading disinformation online (Soares & Recuero, 2021). Once elected, the Bolsonaro government redirected its efforts toward a permanent campaign environment characterized by the performance of different online militias. This network of supporters, consisting of blogs and various social media platforms, constitutes a "toxic environment" and is responsible for attacking political opponents, spreading "seeds of hatred," and threatening democratic institutions (Mello, 2020). Although it is not known for sure how these brigades work and how many people are working them, the operating model acts as a kind of shadow cabinet popularly known as the Office of Hate.

The Office of Hate is, at worst, an allegory to the actions of Bolsonaro government supporters on social media, particularly promoting agendas and participating in online disputes, which include hashtag wars. There are reports of bots being used to inflate political actions by government supporters. A study showed that 55% of pro-Bolsonaro messages on Twitter regarding antidemocratic acts and the government crises were posted by bots (Kalil & Santini, 2020), but identifying bots on social media is always difficult and controversial. For this reason, this study discusses the organizational action model of these brigades and not the bots. Several studies have already explored the context of antagonism in hashtag wars in Brazil, from the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff (Penteado et al., 2021; von Bülow & Dias, 2019) to the 2018 elections (Vinhas et al., 2020), but as far as we know, there is no longitudinal and comparative study of multiple hashtags or an analysis that focuses on descriptive statistics of the organizational model of each hashtag and not on their content or the profile of the individuals involved.

4.2. Hashtag Wars During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Although the online militias of Bolsonaro government supporters already had a strong presence in hashtag wars, the successive crises that the government went through in 2020 have further intensified the political temperature among the far-right. At the beginning of the pandemic, the denialism of Bolsonaro and his supporters put him in direct conflict with then-Minister of Health, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, who resigned from his position in April 2020. In the same month, one of the main guarantors of the government, former judge Sergio Moro, then Minister of Justice, also resigned, alleging direct interference by the president in the management of the Federal Police. The following month, another Minister of Health, Nelson Teich, resigned, and the Supreme Court's investigations into Moro's allegations started a series of conflicts between the Executive and the Judiciary. Restrictions during the pandemic also led to conflicts with mayors and governors due to the politicization of the health crisis (Pereira & Nunes, 2021). The government's disapproval rating reached an all-time high at that point. This scenario sparked even greater engagement among government supporters who reacted on social media with proselytizing messages.

Between May and July 2020, the hashtag wars reached their zenith in government. In late July the Supreme Court ordered the suspension of a number of accounts of government supporters on social media, thus causing some operations to lose steam. Furthermore, as government approval ratings slowly started showing signs of improvement, the hashtag wars also lost their *raison d'être*.

The three-month period between May and July was a unique opportunity for the study of this kind of repertoire. This is a period in which Bolsonaro's far-right government was cornered and needed to count on its support base. On the other hand, the opposition tried to take advantage of the moment by promoting a series of attacks, including those sponsored not only by sectors from the left but also the center-right.

Hashtag wars between the far-right and the opposition became a game for visibility and engagement. But, unlike the opposition, which sought to present a "broad front" against the government, the far-right increasingly lost support (Gomes, 2020), and became more homophilic and uniform, with less plurality.

This study is anchored in a comparative analysis of the pro-Bolsonaro government and oppositional hashtags to identify distinctive characteristics. The literature argues that the use of political hashtags has become a repertoire used by grassroots organizations to vocalize protests (Santos & Reis, 2022), but little is discussed about how hashtag wars have been used strategically by supporters of far-right governments. What are the specifics of the organizational model of political actions in hashtag wars performed by the far-right? Can hashtags that support the Bolsonaro government be compared to the dimensions that are usually used to analyze other types of contentious actions, namely the engagement of individuals, the search for visibility, and the plurality of its audiences? And what do the hashtag wars

between the far-right and the opposition in Brazil say about Bolsonarism?

The hypotheses presented here comprise these three dimensions of digital activism and seek to compare the Bolsonarist hashtags with those from the opposition. Such hypotheses hold that (H1) far-right hashtags from Bolsonaro supporters have greater individual engagement among users than oppositional hashtags, (H2) Bolsonarist hashtags also last longer and achieve greater visibility, and lastly, (H3) hashtags in favor of the Bolsonaro government have a more homophilic nature to them and permit less plurality. Regarding this last hypothesis, it is worth noting that this article does not focus on a debate about political pluralism, but seeks to observe a tendency for collective actions to encompass distinct users, and therefore multiple audiences.

5. Methods

This study is based on a sample of 6,129,850 million tweets created by 536,004 users associated with 20 political hashtags collected over a three-month period. All hashtags originally circulated on Portuguese-speaking Twitter and were primarily aimed at Brazilian users. The selection criteria involved systematic monitoring carried out by the researchers themselves, collecting the top 50 trending topics on Twitter every ten minutes. These 50 trends were then analyzed and any hashtag not directly related to political themes were discarded. Later, for simplification, we decided to keep only the hashtags that enunciatively presented themselves as either supporting or criticizing the Bolsonaro government. As a result, the period between May and July 2020 was detected as a highly political mobilization period on Brazilian Twitter, with 49 hashtags related to Bolsonaro, either supporting or criticizing him.

Each of these hashtags was collected individually using Version 3 of Twitter's Search API intended for academic use. The data collection interface is based on the R language and the academictwitteR package which allows access to historical data. A uniform criterion was adopted, which also helped reduce the massive amount of data to be analyzed. As a result, hashtags that had less than 20,000 tweets in total and/or had the highest peak of activity in a 15-minute interval of less than 1,000 tweets were left out.

The final sample consists of 11 hashtags in favor of the Bolsonaro government and nine hashtags against it. The first group contains hashtags such as: #Patriotas ComBolsonaro (#PatriotsWithBolsonaro), #EuApoio Bolsonaro (#ISupportBolsonaro), and others. The second group has hashtags such as: #ForaBol□onaro (#OutBol□onaro), #Somos70Porcento (#WeAre70 Percent), and #ImpeachmentJa (#ImpeachmentNow).

The distribution of tweets between the hashtags in support of Bolsonaro and those against him is lopsided. Hashtags supporting Bolsonaro have 4,709,565 tweets from 264,469 users. Hashtags against Bolsonaro have 1,420,285 tweets from 308,099 users. These initial discrepancies illustrate distinct patterns of action between the hashtag activists and may provide explanatory factors for the analyses below.

After collecting the tweets associated with each hashtag, we then performed descriptive statistical analyses. Among the observed metadata, we considered the total number of tweets for each hashtag, the maximum peak of tweets, the average and median of tweets in a 15-minute interval, the time difference between the first and the last moments when the hashtag accumulated 1,000 tweets, and the engagement rates provided by Twitter itself. These descriptive data were coupled with simple social network statistics, such as indegree, which is the number of users who published tweets associated with each hashtag.

Our analysis shows that not only are the behavior of hashtags and the volume of tweets and users associated with them very different between oppositional and far-right hashtags, but these differences help us understand the action strategies each of these groups employ in the digital environment. The data show that the far-right is more effective at optimizing the visibility of its agendas and the engagement of its users, yet it is prone to lesser plurality since users affiliated with these groups assume more radical views and integrate more homophilic audiences (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2016).

6. Results

There are basically two ways to observe the evolution of a hashtag. The first is by the simple distribution of tweets over time and the other is by the cumulative sum of tweets over time. These two methods allow us to identify the peak of activity of a collective action on Twitter and the acceleration of its growth, the latter based on the sigmoid interpolation represented by a kind of S-shaped curve. Epidemiological curves like these have been efficient at assessing the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in recent months. Although there are important ontological and epistemological differences between studying the spread of diseases and the diffusion and circulation of tweets, there is a body of research that proposes to understand how political actions can be understood through logistic curves similar to those used for monitoring viral dynamics in public health. Christiansen (2009) reviewed previous studies and determined four stages of social movements: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline. All of these stages can be represented within an S-shaped curve, which suggests that social movements often flourish, spread, are co-opted or repressed, and die. The overall trajectory of these movements, and of digital activism in particular, given the proportions, essentially follows a dynamic of viralization and suggests that statistical methodologies similar to those that monitor the spread of a virus can be incorporated by social scientists.

Thus, the comparative observation of these curves for each of the analyzed hashtags allows us to understand structural differences between far-right and oppositional hashtag activisms. The first point worth mentioning here is that, on a normalized scale, the cumulative curves of tweets in hashtags favorable to Bolsonaro generally reach much higher levels.

As shown in Figure 1, Bolsonarist hashtags reach a higher plateau faster than anti-Bolsonarist hashtags. This means that their degree of coordination is probably greater as more tweets are published in a shorter time span, thus appearing on Twitter's trending topics sooner.

As Figure 1 and Table 1 demonstrate, most Bolsonarist hashtags exceeded the threshold of 250,000 tweets (avg = 428,142.3, median = 281,555), a number reached only on two occasions for hashtags in opposition to Bolsonaro (avg = 157,809.4, median = 107,869). In both cases, they were driven by center-right sectors that supported the critics of the government and promoted oppositional hashtags. In addition, regarding the 15-minute interval peaks of activity, Bolsonarist hashtags have a much higher volume of user participation than anti-Bolsonarist ones (avg = 8,464.6 compared to avg = 5,072.4). All these indices suggest that Bolsonaro supporters are more organized and do not disseminate or waste time with opposition hashtags.

These statistics can support H1. Far-right hashtags definitely have higher individual engagement among users than oppositional hashtags. It is worth noting that the metrics used here to assess engagement within a hashtag are considerably different from those used by the Twitter platform to assess engagement within a specific tweet. In fact, what Twitter calls engagement metrics for individual tweets can be perceived as visibility metadata for hashtags because the more an individual engages with digital content on social media, the more this content becomes visible to other users.

Therefore, the next step towards determining whether Bolsonarist hashtags last longer and achieve greater visibility should involve social metrics from the platform itself, such as the number of likes and retweets in the collected tweets. In addition, the number of followers of users who participate in each of these hashtags can offer an interesting glimpse into the influence network these collective actions have. Of course, the length of time that hashtags continue to receive new tweets is another interesting element.

Regarding the latter index, one can notice that the average time difference between the first and the last moment when hashtags reached 1,000 tweets is considerably higher among Bolsonarist hashtags (avg = 2.71 weeks) than it is for anti-Bolsonarist hashtags (avg = 2.43 weeks). This means that hashtags mainly integrated by far-right actors and Bolsonaro government supporters last around 48 hours longer than the average of anti-Bolsonarist ones, with at least 1,000 tweets published every 15 minutes.

In addition, there are more retweets on average among far-right hashtags (avg = 655 RTs per tweet) than among oppositional (avg = 457), although curiously there are fewer likes per tweet in the first case (avg = 1.96) when compared to the second (avg = 2.95), which may indicate that, for the far-right, the circulation of messages is more important than interest manifestation.

Twitter has two different metrics that relate user accounts to each other: the number of accounts followed (also called friends or followees) and the number of followers. We focused on the statistics for followers. The first aspect to consider is that the average number of followers for each user participating in anti-Bolsonarist hashtags (avg = 2,723) is greater than the average number of followers for users who participate in hashtags that support Bolsonaro (avg = 2,141). However, as we can see in Figure 2, Bolsonarist hashtags present a regular dispersion in the data. When it comes to opposition hashtags, only three of them present this kind of dispersion, all from celebrities boosting the campaigns. This observation is an indication that users with many followers participate more often in Bolsonarist hashtags, while some opposition hashtags rely mostly on ordinary users whose influence is more restricted. Although these profiles were not categorized, our study observed that the 50 users with the most followers in each of the segments included many celebrities, influencers, politicians, parties, intellectuals, and journalists. Media outlets also appeared here, but at a relatively low rate, ranging from 12% (hashtags pro-Bolsonaro) to 16% (hashtags against Bolsonaro).

Another statistic that supports this conclusion is the median. Unlike the mean, a very low median suggests that the upper threshold of a sample may contain some outliers. Among the hashtags we analyzed, the average median for the number of followers for each user participating in pro-Bolsonaro hashtags is 534, while in the hashtags against Bolsonaro this number drops to 434. We can also see (Figure 2) that there were only four oppositional hashtags that had users with more than 3,000 followers, while all the Bolsonarist hashtags had users with more than 4,000 followers.

The results, therefore, support H2. Far-right hashtags last for a longer time, have a greater number of individual retweets, achieve greater circulation, and ultimately have more influential users participating, these users having a greater number of followers.

But are greater engagement and greater visibility reflected in a greater plurality of positions among users associated with these hashtags? To better understand this participatory dimension, we took into account the number of unique users, the number of tweets, and the relationship between users and hashtags across the entire sample.

Some users participated in more than one collective action, including some who participated in hashtags that both support and criticize Bolsonaro. Table 2 summarizes this information. The number of total users

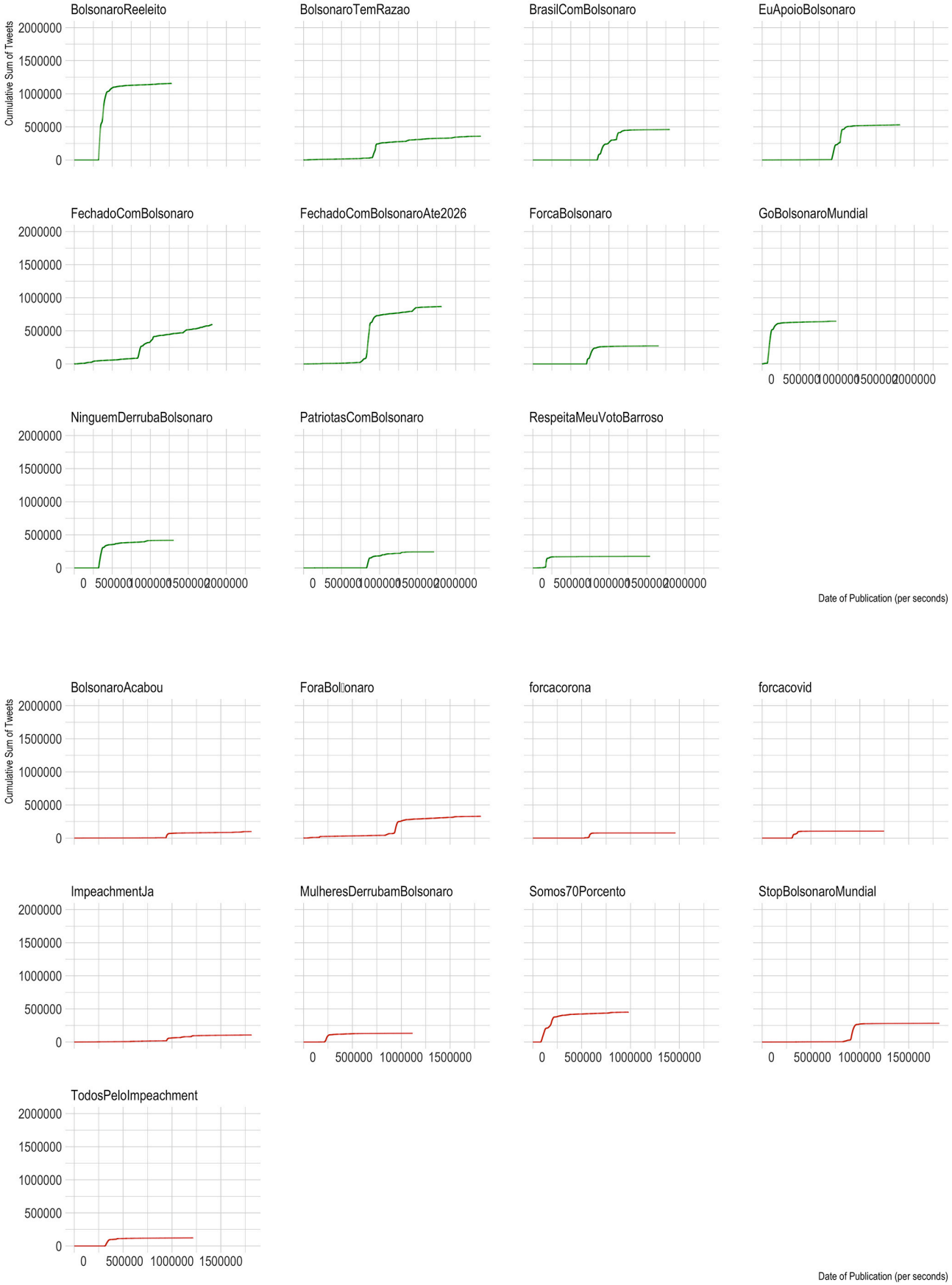

Figure 1. Cumulative sum of hashtag tweets over time.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of hashtags.

Hashtag	Stance	No. tweets	Peak	Avg 15 min
PatriotasComBolsonaro	pro	197,788	4,646	1,796.0
BrasilComBolsonaro	pro	273,928	4,713	1,568.9
EuApoioBolsonaro	pro	281,555	4,885	1,013.1
BolsonaroReeleito	pro	1,111,599	22,074	1,141.1
FechadoComBolsonaro	pro	449,229	5,222	572.1
BolsonaroTemRazao	pro	201,412	3,131	746.3
RespeitaMeuVotoBarroso	pro	128,460	10,582	1,153.7
NinguemDerrubaBolsonaro	pro	370,265	8,359	1,113.3
FechadoComBolsonaroAte2026	pro	794,297	12,218	968.5
GoBolsonaroMundial	pro	630,494	11,371	845.5
ForcaBolsonaro	pro	270,538	5,910	286.9
		average = 428,142.3 *median = 281,555*	*average = 8,464.6* *median = 5,910*	*average = 1,018.7* *median = 1,013.1*
BolsonaroAcabou	against	77,418	5,036	443.5
ForaBol卐onaro	against	241,056	5,601	395.6
forcacorona	against	62,949	6,093	270.3
forcacovid	against	81,918	5,184	221.3
ImpeachmentJa	against	87,837	3,849	150.9
MulheresDerrubamBolsonaro	against	131,485	4,254	125.6
Somos70Porcento	against	347,444	5,133	549.9
StopBolsonaroMundial	against	282,309	7,582	233.3
TodosPeloImpeachment	against	107,869	2,920	577.0
		average = 157,809.4 *median = 107,869*	*average = 5,072.4* *median = 5,133*	*average = 329.7* *median = 270.3*

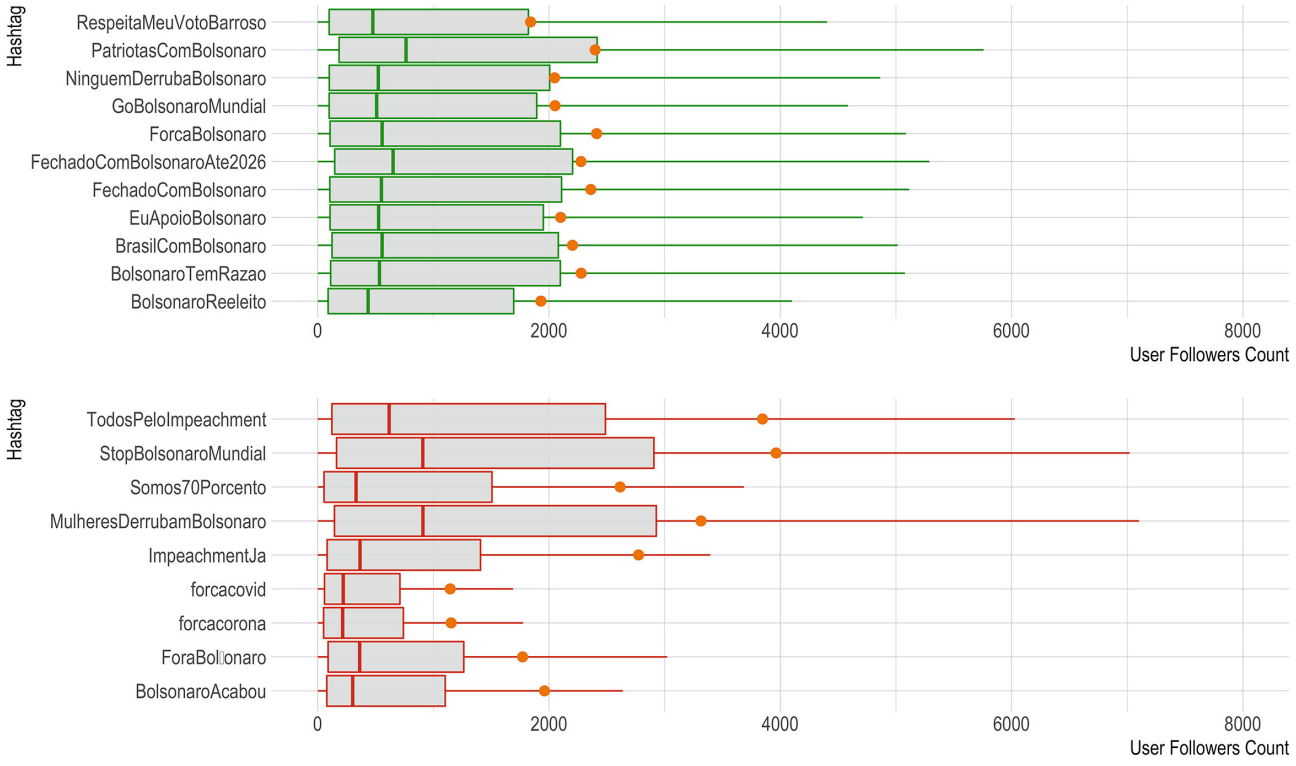

Figure 2. User followers count per hashtag.

Table 2. User engagement metrics for hashtags.

Hashtag	Stance	No. users	Retweets per tweet (average)	Followers per user (average)
PatriotasComBolsonaro	pro	40,289	506	2,400
BrasilComBolsonaro	pro	63,178	565	2,203
EuApoioBolsonaro	pro	59,599	587	2,100
BolsonaroReeleito	pro	131,423	489	1,930
FechadoComBolsonaro	pro	73,339	434	2,362
BolsonaroTemRazao	pro	51,784	623	2,279
RespeitaMeuVotoBarroso	pro	34,675	1,085	1,841
NinguemDerrubaBolsonaro	pro	66,249	888	2,049
FechadoComBolsonaroAte2026	pro	89,054	859	2,276
GoBolsonaroMundial	pro	87,618	799	2,052
ForcaBolsonaro	pro	66,615	536	2,412
		average = 69,438.5 *median = 66,249* *total users = 763,823* *unique users = 264,469*	*average = 655* *median = 2*	*average = 2,141* *median = 534*
BolsonaroAcabou	against	37,117	610	1,961
ForaBol卐onaro	against	104,465	976	1,772
forcacorona	against	37,829	667	1,154
forcacovid	against	48,997	188	1,146
ImpeachmentJa	against	29,834	260	2,775
MulheresDerrubamBolsonaro	against	25,185	144	3,315
Somos70Porcento	against	86,769	479	2,615
StopBolsonaroMundial	against	50,629	247	3,964
TodosPeloImpeachment	against	27,878	286	3,846
		average = 49,855.9 *median = 37,829* *total users = 448,703* *unique users = 308,009*	*average = 457* *median = 4*	*average = 2,723* *median = 434*
Total		*average = 60,626.3* *median = 55,691.5* *total users = 1,212,526* *unique users = 536,004*	*average = 561.4* *median = 550.5*	*average = 2,322.6* *median = 2,239.5*

who participated in pro-Bolsonaro hashtags is 763,823. However, if we consider only unique users, that is, the ones who do not participate in multiple hashtags, this number drops to 264,469 (ratio of 2.89). For the hashtags against Bolsonaro, there are 448,703 total users and 308,009 unique users (ratio of 1.46). More users participate in multiple hashtags supporting Bolsonaro than users who participate in oppositional hashtags.

Nevertheless, the average participation for each government-friendly hashtag is 69,438 users per hashtag for far-right supporters and 49,856 users per hashtag for the opposition. The number of tweets follows the same logic, with an average of 428,142 tweets per hashtag for supporters and 157,809 tweets per hashtag for the opposition. The histogram presented in Figure 3 shows that fewer users are participating in just one pro-Bolsonaro hashtag compared to opposition hashtags, and proportionately more users participating in multiple hashtags.

Lastly, Figure 4 presents these relational data in a social network analysis graph. The graph was modeled based on the Force Atlas 2 distribution algorithm (Jacomy et al., 2014) and colorized through categorical edge classification. In the graph, oppositional hashtags are more spatially dispersed than far-right hashtags since there is a greater number of overlaps from users who participate in multiple actions simultaneously in the latter segment. One interesting case is the hashtag #ForcaBolsonaro, the one that is hijacked the most. As widely discussed in the literature (Burgess & Baym, 2020), it is quite common for some hashtags to be hijacked by activists. The wording of this hashtag, in Portuguese, is originally favorable to Bolsonaro and can be read as something like #GoBolsonaro, but lacks a cedilla (Ç). Without this diacritical mark, the word *força* (strength) becomes *forca* (gallows), and the whole meaning falls apart. This is why #ForcaBolsonaro, although initially launched by

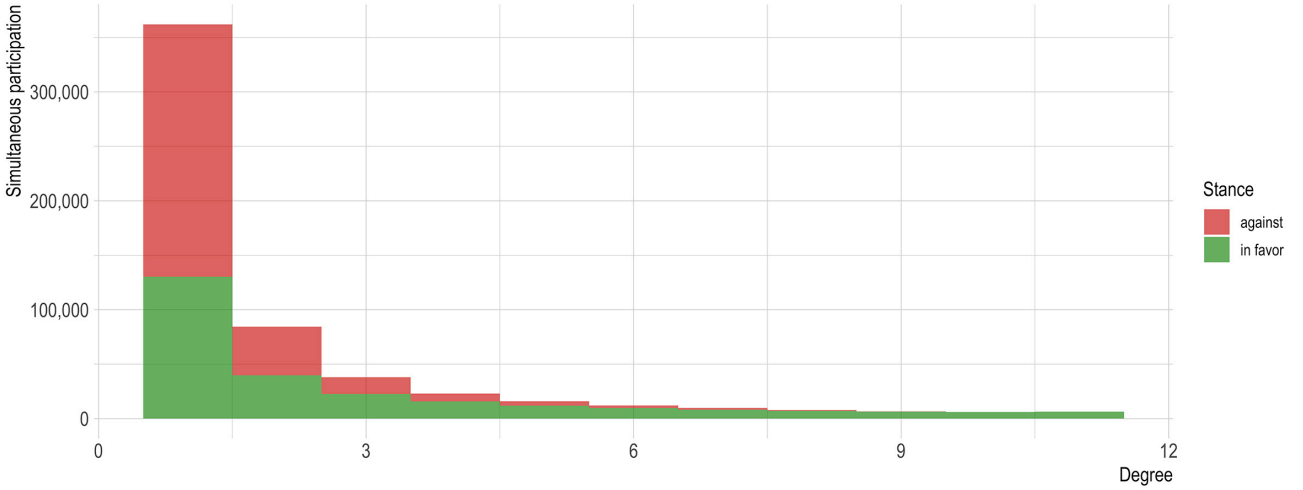

Figure 3. Simultaneous participation histogram of hashtag users.

government supporters, was quickly dropped after the opposition started using it as a satire.

Each hashtag, therefore, has its own history. Some work as a trial, a prequel or a sequel to others, as is the case with #FechadoComBolsonaro and #FechadoCom BolsonaroAte2026 (#TogetherWithBolsonaroUntil2026). Other hashtags relate directly to their counterparts. Studies on social movements argue that movements often frame their claims by directly responding to or denying other movements (Ayoub & Chetaille, 2017; Benford & Hunt, 2003). Significant examples of this can be seen in enunciative disputes in hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, or in memes like "I Am the 99 Percent" and "I Am the 53 Percent" during the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations (Milner, 2016). Most of the hashtag wars between the far-right and the opposition in Brazil are conducted through this type of meta-enunciative buzzword. In some of these statements, knowledge of the context and relational data are essential for understanding the meaning. A hashtag like #forcacovid (#gocovid, in free translation) can only be understood if observed as a reaction to the original statement #ForcaBolsonaro in support of Jair Bolsonaro, who had announced that he had contracted Covid-19 a few days prior. Something similar occurs with the hashtags #MulheresDerrubamBolsonaro (#Women TakeBolsonaroDown) and #NinguemDerrubaBolsonaro (#NobodyTakesBolsonaroDown), both related to polls

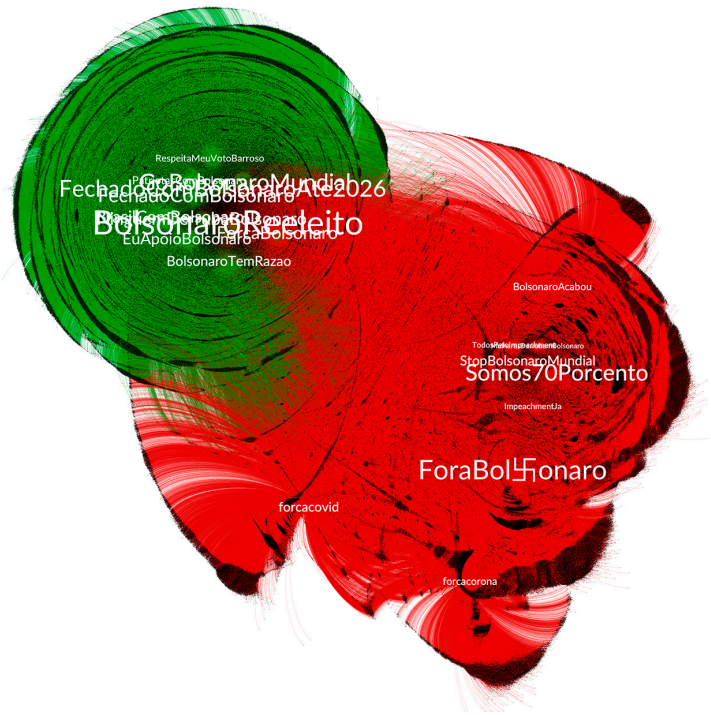

Figure 4. Relational data of hashtags.

showing that the Bolsonaro government's popularity was lower amongst women.

The relational perspective is also important for understanding that users engage in a multifaceted way in these actions. The clusters formed around each hashtag in the graph below show that there are specialized cores whose participation is limited to a specific episode or agenda. So, #TodosPeloImpeachment (#AllForImpeachment), #ImpeachmentJa (#ImpeachmentNow), #StopBolsonaroMundial and #Somos70Porcento (#WeAre70Percent, alluding to the government disapproval in the polls) occupy a joint space of articulation or a "broad front" against Bolsonaro. Most of these hashtags were from not only left-wing voters but also sectors of the center-right. One can see that, in relation to the other oppositional hashtags, these ones have a greater degree of articulation and coordination, and the users who are associated with them are not spatially dispersed as in the other cases.

Moreover, the distance between the nodes for oppositional hashtags suggests that there is a greater diversity of agendas within the engaged users, which somewhat reflects the very fragmentation of opposition sectors. The further away from a concentric arrangement (like the one that nodes for far-right hashtags present, acting like an echo chamber) the less overlap there is between co-participating users and the greater the likelihood that networks will manifest different interests and feelings with a more diverse audience, and consequently, become less homophilic or more plural. Hashtags located in the periphery of the graph show a degree of dispersion and, statistically speaking, have less relevance (eigenvector centrality) in relation to the whole figure. The data seem to support H3. Even with greater engagement and visibility, Bolsonarist hashtags are not as plural as anti-Bolsonarist hashtags, at least in terms of the number of users engaged in the collective actions they leverage.

7. Conclusion

Indeed, this study has an important set of limitations, among which is the fact that the analysis refers to a specific period in time and a relatively small set of political hashtags under comparison. It should also be noted that hashtag wars are only part of the dispute between political groups on Twitter, with a large contingent of politically polarized messages not being associated with hashtags, and therefore, were not addressed in this article. This study is also unable to account for other political realities that are circumstantially different from the Brazilian scenario. Nor can it answer for digital activism practices on platforms other than Twitter. In addition, although this article brings results that account for different patterns and behaviors between far-right supporters and oppositionists when engaging in hashtag wars, up to this point we cannot claim that there are influence operations and hierarchical distribution of tasks between users, as there is no assessment of whether the disseminated content is organically or strategically published. Even still, we believe it does shed light on important aspects of hashtag warfare in polarized political contexts and can contribute to a better understanding of the strategic uses of digital platforms for political activism.

Among the main contributions of this article, it is observed that digital activism in contexts where the far-right is in charge has proved to be an efficient weapon for the dispute over agendas and eventual political proselytism. The level of organization of far-right groups in social media demonstrates that not only have activist repertoires become popular and normalized among different sectors (Karatzogianni, 2014; Morozov, 2017) but digital platforms can also be co-opted by groups that appropriate its affordances the best, including those that support anti-democratic agendas.

The data included in this study seems to substantially support the idea that far-right hashtag activism has managed to appropriate the platform's affordances better than other groups and, as a result, has had a greater impact on the collective actions it organizes, even though it has a less diverse audience than oppositional hashtags. In an extremely polarized political environment such as Brazil's, this characteristic suggests that far-right groups occupy highly visible spaces in social media arenas due to the engagement of their audiences. These findings are not generalizable to other scenarios, but one can note important similarities in the repertoires and organizational models of the Brazilian far-right with other far-right groups around the world, so much so that a transnational comparative research agenda would represent an important advance.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Polarization of Deliberative and Participatory Activists on Social Media

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Abstract
The article demonstrates how social media activism polarizes and clusters into distinct deliberative and participatory arenas, using the case study of online activism for justice for Roman Zadorov in Israel. Zadorov was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. Still, an overwhelming majority of Israelis think he is innocent, with the social media obstruction-of-justice campaign in his support having raised overwhelming exposure and engagement. Theorists distinguish between participatory and deliberative public processes. Supporters of participatory processes advocate for the participation of multiple stakeholders in addressing public concerns. Supporters of deliberative processes advocate for a thorough evaluation of arguments for and against any course of action before decision-making. This study demonstrates how people congregate online and polarize into deliberative and participatory clusters. The "deliberative" cluster is characteristic of groups led by admins who advocate reaching the truth through exposing relevant information and conducting fact-based deliberation. The "participatory" cluster is characteristic of groups led by admins who believe that their activities should aim exclusively at generating more attention and engagement with the general public.

Keywords
activism; deliberation; Israel; obstruction-of-justice campaign; participation; polarization; protest; Roman Zadorov; social media

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Protesting While Polarized: Digital Activism in Contentious Times" edited by Homero Gil de Zúñiga (University of Salamanca / Pennsylvania State University / Diego Portales University), Isabel Inguanzo (University of Salamanca), and Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu (Universidad de La Laguna).

1. Introduction: The Significance of Administrators in Social Media Groups

An extensive literature on online social media activism refers to users as the focus of activity, and to their communities as arenas of "user-generated content," where the emphasis on creating content and engagement lies on users and not on the "management."

However, the literature demonstrates that administrators have a significant impact on the discourse in online communities and on their abilities to realize their goals, far more than average members do. Typically, administrators have three main roles:

1, Member management: Recruiting members, encouraging members to carry out activities, and removing users.
2. Content management: Overseeing the community's agenda, encouraging and contributing to discussions, mitigating discussions and preventing quarrels, and removing posts. Managers ensure that the information disseminated is not too much (to prevent "flooding"), and not too little (to avoid the appearance of inactivity). Managers can also produce special events, such as conversations with experts (Gerbaudo, 2017; Lev-On, 2017).
3. Maintaining social conduct: Clarification of existing norms and penalties for deviators, and methods of resolving disputes (Butler et al., 2007; Kim, 2000).

The significance of group admins is manifest in internet-based social movements (Agarwal et al., 2014; Azer et al., 2019; Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Gerbaudo, 2017; Poell

et al., 2016), and in particular in communities protesting against perceived obstruction of justice. For example, Gies' (2017) study on activism on behalf of Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito in Italy demonstrates that managers functioned as "gatekeepers," and that activists close to the community's inner circle were perceived as more important.

The significance of the admins in the groups calling for justice for Roman Zadorov (the research environment, see Section 4) emerges from an analysis conducted with automatic tools, in the largest group calling for justice for Zadorov, from its inception until January 2016. The analysis shows that the group managers published 1,191 posts, constituting 29.8% of all posts. Of the 20 most prolific advertisers, nine were admins. Moreover, posts published by administrators attracted significantly more engagement than posts published by ordinary users (Lev-On & Steinfeld, 2020).

2. Unity and Fragmentation in Online Communities

Online social media opens up possibilities for the organization of activism. But just as online organization is easier to produce than before, so it is easier to dismantle and build new organizations from the fragments. In general, fragmentation in online communities is easier to execute both cognitively and practically than in offline communities. Members of offline communities intersect in many places, and leaving a community may involve significant economic, social, and cultural losses. Therefore, traditional communities may have a significant impact on member behavior. Leaving or non-normative behavior can be devastating. In contrast, online communities are often composed of a collection of people who generally have no circles of reference beyond the common theme around which they have gathered. While leaving the community can exact a certain cost, for most members, it is not a price that is hard to pay. Hence, the online community is much easier to leave, and forming new groups is also easier (Lev-On, 2009; Lev-On & Hardin, 2007; Reinhard, 2018).

3. Deliberation and Participation in Online Communities

The article demonstrates how social media activism fragments and polarizes into distinct deliberative and participatory arenas. Theorists distinguish two main approaches to involvement in public processes. Some favor participation of as many stakeholders as possible, while others advocate in-depth deliberation for and against suggested courses of action before reaching a decision. Following others, I will label these two approaches: participatory and deliberative, respectively (Chambers, 2009; Floridia, 2017; Mendonça & Cunha, 2014; Mutz, 2006).

Participation, online and offline, can come in a variety of shapes and forms such as public expression of opinions, attempts at persuasion, public actions expressing identification or protest, and of course elections for various institutions that influence decision-making (Arnstein, 1969; Nabatchi & Mergel, 2010). The theories that focus on and advocate participation in democratic contexts refer to intrinsic factors such as gains that people have from participation, as well as extrinsic factors such as the quality of decision-making and the legitimacy of the regime (i.e., Mansbridge, 1983).

According to supporters of deliberative democratic ideas, realizing the idea of democracy should be based not only on representation and voting mechanisms, but also on processes including search for information and arguments, and weighing of pros and cons of various opinions and values until reaching informed decisions (Bohman, 2000; Chambers, 2003; Fishkin, 2009; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Mendelberg, 2002). Fishkin (2009) argues that the quality of deliberation is a product of access to relevant and accurate information, participants' ability to respond to arguments they encounter, representation of the major position of the public during the deliberation, sincere weighing of the arguments by participants, and equal consideration of the arguments, independent of the participants who offer them. Such conditions can apply in a variety of arenas, ranging from small-scale committees and think tanks, to newspapers and of course certain online social media platforms, to which large chunks of the public discourse have migrated in recent years (Black, 2011; Roberts, 2004).

Deliberative processes require in-depth knowledge of facts and arguments and therefore seem more appropriate for small groups. As the number of participants in the decision-making process increases, the process almost automatically becomes less deliberation-oriented. Thus, the more deliberation-oriented the processes are, the less participatory they tend to be, and vice versa. Many hoped that the growth of online social media would provide the scaffolding for decision-making processes that are both participatory and deliberative. But as the analysis below demonstrates, a different phenomenon occurs spontaneously—clustering and polarization into two clusters of activists and groups: participatory-oriented or deliberation-oriented (see Buozis, 2019; Gaines & Mondak, 2009; Hedrick et al., 2018; Nekmat & Lee, 2018).

4. Research Environment: Justice for Roman Zadorov Social Media Activism

On December 6, 2006, the 13-year-old Tair Rada was found murdered at her school in Katzrin, Israel. Roman Zadorov, a flooring installer who worked at the school, was arrested six days later, and a week later confessed to the killing. Two days after the reconstruction, he again confessed but then immediately recanted, and has since denied connection to the murder. Ultimately, Zadorov was convicted of murder in 2010 and sentenced to life

in prison. The verdict referred to a "high-quality, dense and real fabric of evidence" (Author, year, page number if applicable) that points to Zadorov, including his confessions to the informant and to police investigators, reconstruction of the murder, and a shoe imprint on the victim's pants that, according to the police expert, most likely originated from Zadorov's shoe (Nazareth District Court, 2010, pp. 251–252). Zadorov's appeal to the Supreme Court was rejected in 2015.

But the firmness of the court's ruling contradicts the public court of law, with opinion polls repeatedly showing that an overwhelming majority of the public thinks Zadorov is innocent. In 2021, a Supreme Court judge decided to grant Zadorov a retrial (Lev-On, in press).

Already in the period immediately after the murder, the affair attracted the attention of the public, partly because the victim was a young girl murdered in the middle of the day in school. Another source that helped to cast doubt on Roman Zadorov's involvement in the murder was Tair Rada's mother. Shortly after Zadorov recounted how the murder was committed, she declared that she doubted whether he was indeed the killer. Over the years, problems in Zadorov's confession and reconstruction also contributed to these doubts as well as the existence of alternative narratives about the identity of the murderer(s), the manner in which the murder was committed, and the motives behind it.

Another factor responsible for the overwhelming public interest in the case is the intensive social media activity to promote Zadorov's innocence. Since 2009, many Facebook groups have been established that deal with this affair. In 2015, after Zadorov's appeal to the Supreme Court was rejected, the number of members of these groups soared, the largest of which, The Whole Truth About the Murder of the Late Tair Rada, became one of the largest in Israel (Ben-Israel, 2016). The investigation materials were made available on the Truth Today website (from 2016). There are also a number of YouTube channels which include video materials related to the affair (including investigative videos, conversations with the police informer, and the reconstruction).

Apart from its scope, the activity on social media for Zadorov is unique in other aspects (Grossman & Lev-On, in press; Lev-On, in press):

1. The context: The activity takes place in the context of a murder trial and a call for justice for a putative false conviction. In contrast, findings and products of police investigations and legal proceedings are typically far from the public eye.
2. The identity of participants in the discourse: Typically, the participants in the public discourse regarding law and justice are "insiders"—police officers, lawyers, judges, reporters, and legal commentators. In the Zadorov case, however, the involvement of "outsiders" is evident, including activists who are familiar with small and large issues.
3. The activity is also unique in its significant effects; for example, on public opinion of the functioning of the relevant state institutions and Zadorov's guilt/innocence (Lev-On, in press).

In addition, this activism is unique in how it has led to the many discoveries by activists who pore through the investigation materials, including ones that led to the decision to hold a retrial for Zadorov (Lev-On, in press).

For all these reasons, activism on behalf of Zadorov represents a fascinating case for examining the characteristics and effects of social media activism.

5. Research Method

This study is based on netnographic research. Netnography is a qualitative interpretive research approach to studying the behavioral and communicative patterns of individuals and groups online (Kozinets, 2010; Rageh & Melewar, 2013).

Netnography involves collecting data from various online sources such as social networks, chats, petition sites, and more. Researchers can identify communities, observe and join them, and interview participants. The triangulation of participant observation, interviews, and content analysis enables a comprehensive picture of justice for Zadorov activism. This netnographic study lasted four years, from December 2015 (i.e., the rejection of Zadorov's appeal to the Supreme Court and resulting intensification of activism) until December 2019, and includes: observations of activism, analysis of content posted on social media groups, and interviews with social media group administrators.

5.1. Observations of Activism

Continuous contacts were established with group administrators and leading activists. Conversations with administrators were also about issues and dilemmas that arose regarding content that emerged in the groups and activities that took place. Netnographic research was particularly helpful in learning about group schisms and activist discoveries.

5.2. Analysis of Content Posted on Social Media Groups

Fifteen active Facebook groups were identified, with more than 300,000 members in total. The accumulation of posts and the responses they elicited were documented in real-time. The more active groups were sampled daily; other groups were sampled weekly.

5.3. Interviews with Social Media Group Administrators

Twenty-five interviews with administrators of the various groups were conducted. These dealt with the general background of the interviewees, perceptions of the goals and impact of activism, questions about

group management, and more. The interviews lasted an hour to an hour-and-a-half and were held in locations amenable to relaxed interactions, such as cafes. They were conducted by four interviewers under the supervision of the lead researcher and were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The presentation of the findings focuses on the interviews and is supported by excerpts from content posted in the groups.

6. Findings

6.1. General Characteristics of Admins

Participation in social activity is related to a number of characteristics, the first among which are age and income. As a rule of thumb, participants tend to be adults with high socioeconomic status (Schlozman et al., 2010). In recent decades, and as part of the dramatic increase in the use of online social media, this trend has also increased for organizing and participating in social protests. A significant body of research addressing entrepreneurs leading protests centered on social media suggests that they tend to be younger (Coleman, 2014; Cortellazzo et al., 2019) and with higher technological capabilities than the capabilities of leaders of traditional protests, who relied on managerial and social—but not on technological—abilities (Agarwal et al., 2014; Coleman, 2014; Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Gerbaudo, 2017).

The first finding that emerges from the interviews is the significant variance across managers, expressed in age, occupation, and more. Regarding age, about two-thirds of the interviewees are between the ages of 30 and 40. The group admins also include young people in their early 20s, along with older ones in their 40s and 50s. Regarding gender, about two-thirds of the respondents are men, and the rest are women. This finding is interesting because the activity includes exposure to severe violence, which is generally associated with "masculinity" and much less with "femininity." Still, the place of women stands out among the principals. In contrast, in other communities calling for justice for wrongly convicted women is absent (Gies, 2017).

I have also found a wide range of occupations among managers. Most of the leading admins are involved in computers and high-tech. Some have studied law. The vast majority of admins have academic degrees and seem to have well-earning jobs. Most interviewees are skilled in operating Facebook groups, although some have little knowledge in the field. The latter were asked to join the management due to their familiarity with the affair, even though, on a daily basis, they are less active on social media.

6.2. Fragmentation Into Many Groups

As mentioned earlier, online social media opens up many possibilities for protest organization. But just as online communities are easier to establish, so they are easier to dismantle and build new communities from the fragments. This phenomenon is evident in the groups calling for justice for Zadorov. Although the vast majority of activists agree that the purpose of this activism is to reveal the truth and gain justice for Zadorov, they differ in their opinions about the culprits in the murder, the motives for it, and the chain of events that led to it. These differences, in addition to personal controversies that intensified over the years, caused the activism to polarize and split into many groups.

The groups differ in the number of members, the volume of activity, the character of the content, and the prevailing norms and ideas. But there is almost no dispute among the activists that Roman Zadorov is innocent.

The personal disputes and debates between group leaders have spilled over into many posts that have included personal slander where some admins are portrayed as collaborators of the establishment, while others are portrayed as delusional, locked in their conceptions, and harmful to the overarching goal.

Yet, most admins claim that they are happy with the multiplicity of groups, as this way everyone can find the group that suits them and promotes the narrative they believe in, where they can express themselves freely without blockages and deletions: "There is disagreement between the groups….We are the only group that strives to find justice, there are those who are less so" (Interviewee 25).

Some interviewees said that they found it necessary to promote, as managers, certain norms and values, which could only be done when they were in control:

> I agree that it would have been best if there was one group. But when there is only one group then everyone wants to run it according to their worldview….For example, there are those who after I tell them to make accurate allegations say that the police are lying so why shouldn't we? With arguments like this, activism loses its purpose for me…so in my opinion the multiplicity of groups is a necessary evil. (Interviewee 4)

6.3. Deliberation-Oriented Versus Participation-Oriented Managers

Earlier, I demonstrated that justice for Zadorov activism split into a large number of groups. I will now present an interesting finding, according to which the groups converge into two polarized clusters.

As mentioned earlier, theorists distinguish between two main approaches to involvement in public processes. Some favor participation of as many stakeholders as possible, while others advocate for in-depth deliberation for and against any course of action before making a decision. I label these clusters participatory and deliberative, respectively (Chambers, 2009; Floridia, 2017; Mendonça & Cunha, 2014; Mutz, 2006).

Many hoped that the growth of online media would support the decision-making process that incorporates both the participatory and the deliberative aspects. However, as this analysis demonstrates, a different phenomenon has occurred—clustering and polarization into two clusters of activists and groups: participatory-oriented or deliberation-oriented (see Buozis, 2019; Gaines & Mondak, 2009; Hedrick et al., 2018; Nekmat & Lee, 2018).

The study shows that online activism for justice for Zadorov polarizes into two clusters. The first, "deliberative," is typical of groups led by admins who insist that the pursuit of truth is accomplished through the disclosure of information, the creation of knowledge, and administrating fact-based deliberation. The insights of the deliberation should be conveyed to decision makers (such as defense attorneys and the court), so they should be as accurate as possible, and certainly not based on rumors and lies. Dissemination of fake news is harmful, as it presents the activists as less serious. The accuracy of the information is more significant than the number of group members. Therefore, recruiting activists at any cost is not desirable. In addition, discussions with people who hold opposing views are welcome because they allow participants to understand the situation correctly and to deal better with criticisms.

The second cluster, "participation-oriented," is typical of groups whose admins think they will not be taken seriously by decision-makers anyway, and therefore focus on raising public awareness. In these groups, inaccurate and even false content, which may attract public attention, can be found. This cluster is characterized by support for recruiting many group members, even without their knowledge. Opposing views are often treated with disrespect and sometimes with censorship.

Activists from both clusters do not always live in peace with each other as demonstrated in Figure 1, where the author, one of the group admins, points out that there is a distinction between "good and smart people who work behind the scenes" and "charlatans and attention junkies who…quite easily succeeded to take over the struggle."

Table 1 summarizes seven criteria for the differences between the two clusters of activists and groups: strategic differences that relate to differences in the perception of the character of the activity (its goals, orientation, and the importance of recruiting activists) and practical differences, which refer to the manner in which the strategy is implemented, i.e., manner of activist recruitment, level of adherence to reliable source of the content, level of adherence to accurate information, and manner of addressing opposing views.

6.4. Strategic Differences Between the Two Clusters

6.4.1. Goals of the Activity: To Spread Awareness or Create Deliberation

An important distinction between the two clusters concerns the perception of the goals of the activity. After years of activity, the "participation-oriented" activists have realized that the establishment doors are closed to them, and their arguments are not taken seriously. Hence, the purpose of the activity should mainly be to maintain awareness of the affair: "The goal is to talk about it and hear it" (Interviewee 22); "Our goal is basically to reach the general public…we are not limiting ourselves to academics or knowledgeable people" (Interviewee 21).

On the other hand, the group of "deliberation-oriented" activists directs its activities to the public interested in the details of the affair, and even to the establishment. The purpose is to discover new information and generate new insights: "The main goal [is to bring] those who demand knowledge to a place where they have enough knowledge to understand what happened" (Interviewee 10).

6.4.2. Orientation of the Activity: Outwards or Inwards

The orientation of the activity is derived from its goals. "Participation-oriented" activists emphasize the importance of directing the activity "outwards" and making it accessible to the general public. One of the

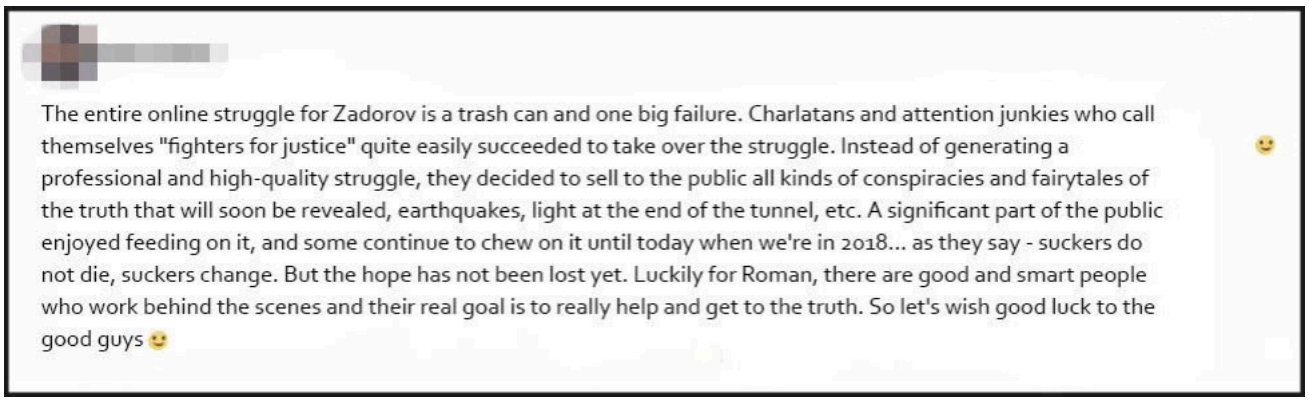

Figure 1. Good and bad activists.

Table 1. Two clusters of admins and groups.

	Deliberation-oriented	Participation-oriented
Strategic differences		
1. Goal of the activity: Is the activity aimed at the general public or also at the establishment?	To the public and the establishment	For the public
2. Orientation of the activity: Is the activity directed "outside" to reach as many recipients as possible, or "inside," and its main purpose is to brainstorm and reach the truth?	Mainly inside	Mainly outside
3. Importance in recruiting activists: Should the emphasis be on the quantity or quality of the activists?	Quality	Quantity
Practical differences		
4. How to recruit activists: Should people be recruited even without asking for consent?	Voluntary only	Non-voluntary, members are also attached without consent
5. Source of content: Should an effort be made to rely on reliable sources?	Qualified sources	False and rumored content can be found
6. Accuracy of information: Should content known to be inaccurate also be distributed?	Purely accurate	Inaccurate as well
7. Opposing views—Should they be allowed and even encouraged or attacked and rejected?	Allowed and even encouraged	Attacked and rejected

managers who retired from it criticizes this orientation: "One of the ways…that the 'big [participation-oriented] group' tries to keep the flame going is to generate a false impression…that some kind of earthquake is going to happen…and something is going to be discovered" (Interviewee 1).

In contrast, the focus of the "deliberation-oriented" activists is more on "in-house" activity. They are not trying to reach out to the general public, but rather to people interested in the affair who seek information and insights.

6.4.3. The Importance of Recruiting Activists

Another strategic question concerns the importance of recruiting activists. Is quantity more important or quality? The issue of "quantity vs. quality" also has technical implications. Facebook's algorithm, which is responsible for exposing the content in the groups, prioritizes large groups. Therefore, activity in large groups may reach a wider audience than activity in small groups.

Among the "participation-oriented" activists, the widespread perception is that the number of activists is important, and therefore as many people as possible must be reached. The information should be made accessible to them, and they should be recruited: "The scope of knowledge does not matter so much, quantity, on the other hand, has great significance. Today we are 250,000 people, if we become half a million or four million people, it could start to tickle someone…" (Interviewee 23); "I have no problem with people joining even if their interest is low and even if they talk nonsense" (Interviewee 26).

On the other hand, admins of "deliberation-oriented" groups claim that the number of members in the group is less important. Some believe that it is better for the number of members not to be large, in order to "filter" people who do not know the affair in depth and whose fingers are light on the keyboard—and to remain within a limited circle of knowledgeable and interested people. Other interviewees argue that the problem is not the size of the group per se but its unwillingness to compromise on the quality of the deliberation. If it were possible to maintain the quality of deliberation with many activists, it would be a winning combination. But since they claim this is not the case, they prefer a smaller group: "I prefer a small group that is of better quality…but I wish I could have both—a huge and high-quality large group" (Interviewee 6); "I would die to have a quarter of a million people in the group but every time I see the quality of the deliberation in the 'big group' I am happy for my part" (Interviewee 14).

6.5. "Practical" Differences Between the Two Clusters

The three differences between the groups I have reviewed so far have been "strategic": the goal and orientation of the activity, and the decision between the number of activists vis-a-vis quality of discussion. In addition to the strategic differences, the interviews also revealed a number of "practical" differences that relate to the ways in which managers think that group activities

should be conducted on a regular basis: how activists are recruited, the source of content in the groups, ensuring content accuracy, and references to opposing views.

6.5.1. Manner of Activist Recruitment

Facebook group members have the option to add their friends, even without their knowledge and consent. In this context, the difference between the two types of groups focuses on the question: Is it appropriate to make an effort and recruit as many activists as possible, even without their consent, or should the group include only activists who consented to join?

Among the "participation-oriented" activists, there is an effort to recruit activists at all costs, and, to that end, they use all the means at their disposal, from advertising the group everywhere to joining all the Facebook friends of the activists. A preferred practice for many of the participation-oriented groups is the automatic addition (without asking those added) of Facebook users. In Figure 2, the group's administrator thanks an activist who added 200 members to the group, claiming that "every additional member is an auxiliary force in a war that is so just."

Compared to the "participation-oriented" groups, where the emphasis is on adding members, in the "deliberation—oriented" groups, the emphasis is on the quality of the deliberation and not on the number of members, so there is no special effort to add members to the group: "I do not add people, whoever it interested should be there….I cannot force anyone to join" (Interviewee 2).

6.5.2. Adherence to Reliable Sources

The next difference between the clusters concerns the source of the content that the administrators approve. Do admins make sure the sources are qualified and trusted? Managers who advocate a participatory approach exercise less discretion in the context of the source of the content, and often do not hesitate to publish content whose origin is unknown and even false: "There were times when [one of the managers] would send me a message that he was uploading content that he knew was not correct just for the sake of provocation" (Interviewee 3).

In contrast, the admins of "deliberation-oriented" groups clearly emphasize that posts should come from trusted and secure sources and are careful not to publish content whose origin is unknown.

6.5.3. Ensuring the Accuracy of the Information

The admins of participation-oriented groups are criticized for not being careful about the accuracy of the content that emerges in the group. For example:

> There are many admins who have a simple goal of increasing circulation so that as many as possible will enter….Accuracy is less important to them, and against this background, they post content that they know is inaccurate….When it's made clear to them in detail that it was inaccurate, they say "never mind." (Interviewee 3)

Managers of the "deliberation-oriented" groups do not only criticize the source of the content, but also the content itself, with the intention that when the information reaches the establishment, it will be taken seriously:

> Objective people who come to read things look at the [lack of] proficiency, understand that these are not serious guys, and then that's what they think—"They are delusional, they are conspirators"….This claim is true, unfortunately, it is true, yes. A lot of people, in this case, I would not go out to battle with them. (Interviewee 1)

> Just an example, Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked, we are burned in her eyes, why? Because people started posting on her wall that the hairs on the palm of Tair's hand belong to her killer. So, she says, "I checked it out, found out they all belong to her." That's on!! From this moment, we are discredited with her—No one can talk to her anymore about the affair. She says, "all these conspirators…." That's why I say the importance of accuracy is inescapable. (Interviewee 3)

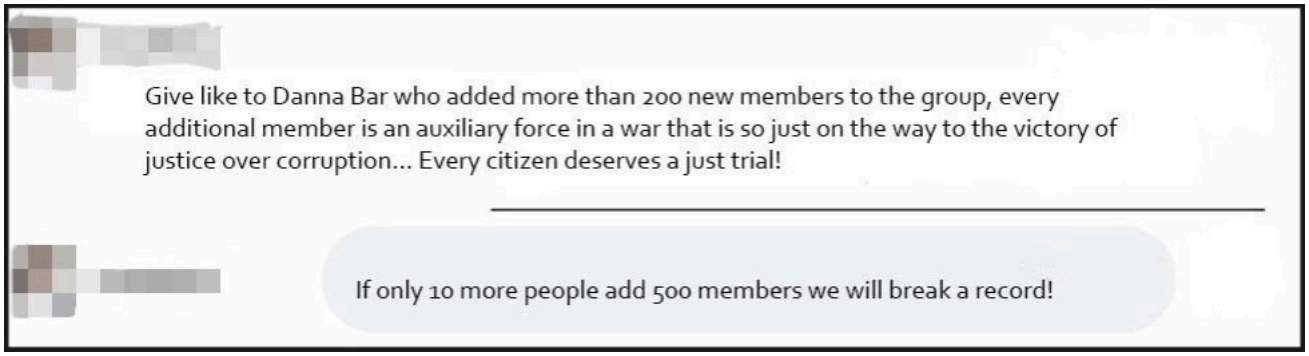

Figure 2. Adding members.

> The hallucinatory and conspiratorial do serious damage and are a distraction of Roman Zadorov's accusers. (Interviewee 6)

6.5.4. Attitude to Opposing Views

Finally, I will examine how managers respond to opinions that are contrary to the prevailing opinion in the group: Do they encourage, or oppose, the expression of opposing views? According to the interviews, the "participation-oriented" managers focus their efforts on conceptual unity. Disagreements regarding the narrative that prevails in the group can, they claim, impair the group's cohesion and its ability to move toward the goal. Therefore, expressing opposing views, and especially those claiming that Zadorov is the killer, is perceived as problematic.

According to some admins, the default in the group is that Zadorov is innocent and whoever thinks otherwise should be removed from the group. The perception of some of the interviewees is that investing time and thought in such reactions is a waste of time. These admins see themselves as "action group" executives and not as someone whose job it is to deliberate and persuade people who think differently:

> The group deals with "Roman Zadorov did not murder," each from his own point of view….We are not a deliberation group. We are an action group….We do demonstrations, we consult what you think should be done next, we give people emails so that they can distribute them by themselves. An action group. (Interviewee 26)

In contrast, among the "deliberation-oriented" managers there is usually no opposition to opposing views, and some welcome them. The reasons for this are varied, from the fact that some of them changed their minds about the identity of the killer and the chain of events themselves—which created a sensitivity in them to the different opinions. Ultimately, they think that it enriches the discourse and even strengthens and sharpens the arguments of the group when they are put to the test in the face of opposing arguments: "People who think differently get full attention….I sometimes come across people whose questions are relevant, and I respond wholeheartedly. Different and opposing views are perfectly fine" (Interviewee 10); "Supporters of conviction? I hug them warmly, give them the whole stage. Very satisfied about them coming to my group" (Interviewee 14).

7. Discussion and Conclusions

Online social media opens up many possibilities for the organization of activism. But just as online organization is easier to produce than in the past, so it is also easier to dismantle and build new organizations from the fragments. Conflicts that seem insignificant lead to the fragmentation of the activity into many spheres, and sometimes to bitter disagreements among activists striving for similar goals.

This article demonstrates how social media activism fragments, polarizes, and clusters into distinct deliberative and participatory arenas, by using the case study of online activism for justice for Roman Zadorov in Israel.

Theorists distinguish between participatory and deliberative public processes. Supporters of participatory processes advocate the participation of multiple stakeholders in addressing public concerns. Supporters of deliberative processes advocate a thorough evaluation of arguments for and against any course of action before decision-making.

Many hoped that online social media would facilitate decision-making processes that are both participatory and deliberative. By contrast, the study demonstrates how people congregate and polarize into either deliberative or participatory clusters. The "deliberative" cluster is characteristic of groups led by admins who advocate reaching the truth through exposing relevant information and conducting fact-based deliberation. Typically, the precision of information is considered more important than the number of discussants. It is crucial that the information is reliable and spreading fake news is considered harmful.

On the other hand, the "participatory" cluster is characteristic of groups led by admins who believe that their activities should aim exclusively at generating more attention and engagement with the general public. In such groups, one can regularly find inaccurate and even fake content.

This article, then, demonstrates that online activism for a certain cause is not a unitary phenomenon, but rather a multi-faceted one composed of a fragmented, clustered, and polarized landscape of social media groups. Future studies should continue and explore the polarization of deliberative or participatory clusters in additional online activist environments, possibly using quantitative tools (for example, quantitative content analysis), to provide further support and elaboration for this significant insight.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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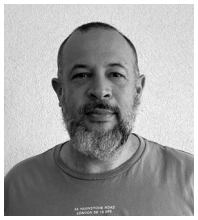

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Article

Social Media and Contentious Action: The Use and Users of QQ Groups in China

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Abstract
This article presents an analysis of a netnographic study of QQ groups engaged in contentious activities in China. Informed primarily by semi-structured in-depth interviews of 34 participants and field observations through years of grounded research, the findings shed light on the communicative dynamics and mobilization strategies of QQ groups in nurturing contentious action and motivating mass participation in social protest. In-group communication stays highly focused on the respective mission of the groups, and it cultivates a sense of shared awareness conducive to collective action. There is also a noticeable contagion effect that transfers the spirit of contestation in terms of speech and action. Mobilizing dynamics in the QQ groups point to a hybrid model of activist-brokered networks, which crosscuts and interconnects elements in Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) prototype of self-organizing networks and organizationally brokered networks. Group leaders and activists resort to a multi-layered mechanism to dissipate contentious information and to mobilize participation in protests.

Keywords
China; collective action; connective action; QQ groups; social media; social protest

Issue
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1. Introduction

Social media have been a leading force of technological innovation and social change in China in the new millennium. Although popular platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are banned from Chinese virtual territories, home-grown technologies have made themselves a ubiquitous presence in people's everyday lives. This research focuses on the role of QQ, an instant-messaging service developed by Tencent, in collective contention. More specifically, our investigation pertains to the use of QQ groups for mobilizing and coordinating mass protests in China. After a review of relevant literature in the context of social media use and collective action, the article reports the findings of our years-long ethnographic research coupled with in-depth interviews of four QQ user groups exclusively dedicated to contentious action, with emphasis on administration of group interaction, organization mechanics, and mobilization strategies. Special attention is paid to how individual and collective circumstances shape group dynamics. In particular, the article draws attention to the emergence of a new type of organization mechanism as enabled through activist-brokered networks in empowering mass contention. Through the conceptual lens of academic research in cross-national settings, its discussion is grounded in the broad socio-political and online environment in China.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mass Protest and Popular Contention in China

China boasts a long history of robust and oftentimes turbulent popular protest from ancient to contemporary times (Perry, 2015). Economic reform and liberalization in

recent decades have unshackled diverse patterns of conflict and resentment embedded in convoluted sociopolitical and economic relationships. As a result, contentious and transgressive activities ranging from property/land rights to labor relations and environmental protection have surged in the past three decades, transitioning China into a "contentious authoritarianism" in which "a strong authoritarian regime accommodates widespread and routinized collective protests" (Chen, 2012, p. 189).

There are two countervailing approaches in the Chinese authorities' handling of contentious politics. On the one hand, social stability has been acclaimed as a hallmark achievement by the ruling Chinese Communist Party, and *weiwen* (stability maintenance) has been a top priority for the state autocracy (Scoggins, 2018). Consequently, minimization of mass protests and public grievances (either through preemptive elimination or peaceful resolution) has been an important benchmark in awarding promotion to government officials (Mirić & Pechenkina, 2022). On the other hand, there is tolerance for and responsiveness to—albeit limited—public dissent and protests of aggrieved citizens, and the official measure may range from reconciliation to co-option and brutal suppression, depending on the nature of the demands and issues at hand (Li, 2019). This "power of instability" as a multipronged mechanism of grievance management gives leverage to defuse conflictual state-society relations into material and symbolic concessions for the parties involved (Lee & Zhang, 2013). The tendency of the Chinese regime to constantly reconsolidate and reconstitute itself in the face of contestations and hold on to power is summarized in the perspectives of "authoritarian resilience" (Sinkkonen, 2021) and "responsive authoritarianism" (Marquis & Bird, 2018), which argue that the authoritarian regime develops the ability to adjust and adapt by allowing a degree of political participation and feedback on contentious issues.

2.2. Social Media and Connective Action

The mainstreaming of online networks in routine life has fundamentally redefined the contours of collective action and social movements (Treré, 2018). The latest waves of social media innovation have pushed digital activism to ever new territories and have expanded the repertoire of formations in which dispersed individuals and formal groups collaborate and coordinate efforts to contemplate, mobilize, and organize contentious action (Kavada & Poell, 2021; Margetts et al., 2015). As noted by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), networked technologies in the digital era have become pivotal to the mobilization and staging of collective action, and, consequently, there has been a dramatic shift from the conventional logic of collective action grounded in the organization-centered and leader-driven mode of resource mobilization to the emerging model of the *logic of connective action* in which "taking public action or contributing to a common good becomes an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, pp. 752–753).

The logic of connective action enables fragmented populations and marginal groups that are hard to reach by formal organizations to mobilize protest networks and coordinate contentious activities via distributed peer-production. Based on the distinct logic of organization and action formations, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) propose a three-part typology of large-scale connective action networks: self-organizing networks, organizationally enabled networks, and organizationally brokered networks. Each ideal model involves different action frames, communication patterns, and organizational actors. Crosscutting all three types is the pivotal role of digital network technologies. In this regard, social media enriches the repertoire of popular contention through power activation (e.g., mobilizing diverse, unequally distributed resources among powerless and marginal groups) and power accrual (e.g., sustaining activism over time) in the absence of strong organizational actors (Leong et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant to the authoritarian polity in China, where formal organizations and institutional establishments tend to align with state power and government interests and cannot be expected to serve as reliable mobilizing channels of contentious actions.

2.3. Organization and Mobilization Dynamics

Classic social movement theory places significant emphasis on the role of formal organizations and clearly identifiable leadership in the mobilizing process (Tilly, 1978). Traditionally, one of the biggest challenges for the underprivileged and the resource-poor to organize collective action has been the lack of efficient and effective means of mobilization. This has drastically changed with the mass diffusion of social networks as manifested via social media. In fact, it is under the premise of personalized communication via digital media networks that the above-mentioned logic of connective action is differentiated from that of conventional collective action. As Gerbaudo (2012) shows through his research on the Arab Spring movement, protest mobilization in the era of social media has become horizontal, decentralized, fluid, self-nurturing, and instantaneous.

It however should not be taken to suggest that contention via social media no longer needs or benefits from leadership. Rather, it means that leadership can be enacted anonymously—unidentifiable, faceless, positionless, and detached from any individuals. Poell et al. (2016) insist that leadership remains important in contemporary protest, both off- and online: "Facilitated by social media, this mode of leadership revolves around *inviting, connecting, steering, and stimulating*, rather than *directing, commanding, and proclaiming*" (Poell et al., 2016, p. 1009, emphasis in the original). Similar dynamics have been noted in student-led protests in

Nigeria (Uwalaka, 2020). In the case of contentious action in China, tactical and strategic approaches to leadership vary, from leader-orchestrated rural protests (Li & O'Brien, 2008) to leaderless resistance (for avoidance of retribution; Cai, 2010) and "mobilization without masses" (i.e., individuals taking action based on guidance by behind-the-scene civil society organizations; Fu, 2018).

Social media platforms have uplifted grassroots participation in digital activism through their varied affordances and broad spectrum of reach to especially the hitherto marginal and powerless groups in society (Khalil & Storie, 2021; Leong et al., 2019; Sæbø et al., 2020). This is particularly true in empowering popular contention in China, where conventional media resources are highly controlled, and interpersonal networks carry significant weight in enacting collective action (Tai, 2018).

2.4. Social Networking via QQ Groups

QQ, an instant-messaging service released by China's multinational conglomerate Tencent in 1999, allows users to chat, email, file-share, and engage in activities resembling conventional online forums or bulletin-board systems via not only the conventional internet but mobile phones, PDAs, and other emerging platforms as well. A particularly popular feature is QQ Group—whose size may vary from a few hundred to a few thousand—which provides a venue for individuals to engage in members-only communicative tasks and allows users to create tiered levels of user groups serving specific interests, purposes, and needs of communication. As a popular configuration of social networking communication, QQ Group has maintained a high level of penetration among Chinese users, encompassing user groups ranging from chat-focused discussion-heavy hobbyists to movement-oriented activists. Typical QQ Group sizes vary from a few dozen to a few thousand.

A competing social networking service is WeChat, also owned by Tencent, which has evolved into a multifunctional super-app for Chinese users since its debut in 2011. Even though there is substantial overlap between WeChat and QQ in their common technical features, each has also built its distinctive affordances catering to different user needs. In the preliminary stage of our field research, we asked over a dozen individuals who had engaged in contentious activities about their modalities of communication, and the overwhelmingly preferred choice was QQ groups, followed remotely by WeChat. The following affordances of QQ groups (in comparison with WeChat) were driving factors: open-endedness (QQ accounts can be created and anonymized easily), flexibility (QQ groups can be customized in accordance with collective needs), archivability and navigability (it is easy to search and store messages), and transportability (attachments and files can be shared conveniently with members). In particular, it was perceived as a formidable inhibitor for WeChat to limit one account per user/mobile phone, whereas multiple QQ accounts can be set up without restrictions to fit individual needs. Because WeChat accounts are tied to individual smartphone numbers and are, therefore, easily identifiable, it was cited as a major concern for personal privacy and security in the context of contentious undertakings. On the other hand, while Twitter has been the primary platform for contentious politics in Western democracies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Poell et al., 2016), its Chinese counterpart Sina Weibo received no mention by the activists we preliminarily surveyed.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Goal and Focus

The purpose of our research pertains to the use of QQ groups as a pivotal platform in contemplating and actualizing contention-based collective action in China. Following the established qualitative research practice of aiming to understand people and things in their natural settings (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Charmaz, 2014), our research questions were broadly defined to interrogate the milieu of communicative dynamics and mobilization strategies of QQ groups in nurturing contentious action and motivating mass participation in social protest from initiation to goal-setting to strategizing on-the-ground actions. More specifically, our interrogations center on this core set of questions: How do contentious QQ groups function from member recruitment to routine communication? How do group members reach a consensus and plan contentious activities? What is the role of leadership, if any, in the process? What are the barriers and roadblocks to confounding collective action?

3.2. Field Sites and QQ Groups

We selected four QQ groups for this study, with each affiliated with a specific cause of the protest. As revealed in Table 1, the four types of contentious activities vary in their respective goals with differing levels of difficulty. Our choice of these groups was driven primarily by the consideration that they represent the most common trajectories of popular protest outside of political pursuit in present-day China based on both extant research literature (Chen, 2012; Elfstrom & Li, 2019; Li, 2019; Tai, 2018) and our personal knowledge. Participants in the groups all hail from the southern province of Guangdong (Canton), a leading region of Chinese civic activism.

The first group (henceforth Group A) mostly comprises college faculty and staff in a relatively new area of a metropolis called University City, with its main goal to campaign for the rights of school-age children to a quality education. The construction of University City typifies the national trends of inflated urban sprawl in past decades in which administratively designated areas (development zones, industrial parks, residential complexes) sprang up through government mandates. As a result, these land-centered "place-making" initiatives

Table 1. QQ Groups represented.

Group	Year of Origin	Group Size	Main Issue(s) of Contention	Informants	Target(s) of Contention	Level of Difficulty	Main Participants	Major Activities
College Faculty Group (A)	February 2012	1,275	Public grade school construction and zoning	13	Local (district) government	Low	Faculty and staff from multiple institutions of higher learning, especially those with school-age children and middle-class residents in the same neighborhood	Petitions and appeals (both on- and offline)
Property Buyer Group (B)	February 2015	458	Property rights and sales delivery	6	Real estate developers and local government zoning authorities	Medium	Property buyers under contract with developers and residents who are already in the precincts	Private and public contests, rallies, and protests
Property Owner Group (C)	November 2017	232	Property rights and post-sale services	7	Property management and local government authorities	Medium	Property owners in one precinct that is contracted with the same property management company	Appeals, petitions, rallies, and protests
Environmental Protection Group (D)	February 2014	388	Waste incinerator plant blockage	8	Government at the municipal and local levels	High	Residents in areas that may be affected by the construction of the incinerator project	Appeals, rallies, demonstrations, protests, civil disobedience, and disorderly conduct

have been lucrative sources for local coffers as well as major contributors to GDP growth. However, this rapid sprawl does not necessarily lead to urbanization because corresponding city-building efforts to provide essential services to residents tend to lag behind. Against this backdrop, this QQ group was founded to coordinate and channel public requests to local government authorities demanding the installation of state-of-the-art public-school facilities for families in the area.

One hallmark of China's economic expansion has been the skyrocketing price of real estate properties across the country. The second QQ group (Group B) relates to the domain of the rising tides of "homeowners' activism" (Elfstrom & Li, 2019) and consists of proprietors-to-be for an apartment mix under construction. Construction of the high-rise complexes broke ground by a well-known national developer shortly after it purchased land through public auction in 2014 from the local government. By the end of 2014, construction was started when the developer garnered a fortune from deposit payments by interested buyers. Lured by fast-rising prices, the developer rescinded the initial terms of sale in late 2015 and offered two alternatives to the pre-sale contractors: opt to get a full refund of their initial deposit or switch to a sales term subject to the much higher current market price. The goal of the participants is, therefore, to petition the district government to pressure the developer to honor its original terms of sale.

The third group (Group C) involves residents of a new urban neighborhood fighting with contracted property management for routine service and maintenance. Normally, residential areas are in the care of property management companies based on a monthly fee through a service contract. But disputes may occur when contractual terms are breached, resulting in sloppy or diminished services to the neighborhood. At the time of our research in 2017 and 2018, members of this group had been engaged in a protracted contestation to seek resolutions by appealing to the property management company and the district government (which has oversight over administrative responsibilities).

The fourth group (Group D) features the largest number of dissenting individuals as well as the utmost level of challenge. Its goal is to stop the local government's effort to build a solid waste incinerator in its vicinity. This contention group is also the longest in duration among all four groups, having continued from 2010 through the whole process of our research. This group fits in with the overall trend of rising waves of environmental contestation in China in recent years, especially the mass movement in opposition to incinerators. This QQ group was one of many organizing and coordinating protest-related actions in the area.

3.3. Data Collection

We utilized a combination of methodological approaches and data sources in this research. Virtual ethnography is a useful approach to disentangle immersive details and rich contexts of online interactions (Boellstorff et al., 2012). The ethnographic component of the research—which lasted from early 2014 to late 2018—consists of observing group discussions and interactions as a regular member in all four groups and occasionally participating in offline group events such as discussion sessions, rallies, and protests. As highlighted by Kozinets (2015), engagement and participation in social life are essential for researchers to feel the pulse of the frontlines of field research.

We collected a variety of data, including archival data of QQ group communications, notes of on-site protests and other activities, and, most importantly, interviews of QQ group members. The main data corpus that informs our analysis comes from semi-structured interviews of the 34 (20 female vs. 14 male) members of the QQ groups (see Table 1). Among the interviewees, 12 were QQ group administrators (core activists, four in Group A, two in Group B, and three each in Groups C and D), and 22 were general participants (periphery followers). Being an active member of these groups offered us the advantage in recruiting research participants, and we complied with the standard procedure of social research in obtaining informed consent from individuals for participating in the interviews. Considering the highly sensitive nature of the topics and activities these groups stand for, we took extra precautions to assure the anonymity of both the participants and the data. Individuals who agreed to participate were asked to choose to complete the interview via QQ text or audio chatting at a time most convenient to their schedule. Each participant was asked similar but not exactly identical questions, often with follow-up prompts where necessary. The interviews were completed from mid-2015 to late 2018. All text-based interviews were saved, and audio chats were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

We followed the three phases of analyzing the interviews: data reduction, data reorganization, and data representation (Roulston, 2014). The analytical procedure is guided by the synthesized strategies as recommended by Charmaz (2014, p. 115) in grounded theory coding of interview data as an effort to "understand participants' views and actions from their perspectives." Our initial coding (open coding) for the purpose of data reduction was conducted with a subsection of the interview data to extract meanings and interpretations into major emerging categories. In our data reorganization phase (focused coding), we applied and modified the previous coding scheme by traversing through the complete data corpus. Once the data coding was concluded, we followed the logic and logistics of axial coding in integrating the data in order "to find coherence to the emerging analysis" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 147). While coding data into categories, we also made an effort to "read

holistically and holonically for a hermeneutic interpretation" (Kozinets, 2015, p. 215) of the synthesized narratives from each interviewee.

In ascertaining dominant and recurring themes and clusters of meaning, we were primarily inspired by the conceptual and procedural approach as mapped out by Braun and Clarke (2021). We extracted thematic threads and integrated them into coherent narrative lines in relation to our core research questions.

4. Findings

4.1. Gatekeeping, Identity Building, and Monitoring

Throughout the process of observation, participation, and interaction with group members, we noted salient niceties in the management of memberships and the day-to-day operation of group activities in the context of their missions and stated goals. Norms, expectations, and routine patterns of interactions among members point to the unique collective identity and psyche of each group. This all starts with the initiation of group memberships. Across all four groups, a common thread we noted is that group administrators are very circumspect in admitting new members and monitoring any potential flags that may disrupt or derail the predefined mission of group activities. Group administrators and core members worked diligently to reach out to a large base of individuals who were likely participants of collective action. Groups were advertised publicly through posters in prominent venues, and interpersonal networks were mobilized for recruiting. Activists in Groups A, B, and C even adopted a carpet recruiting strategy by going door-to-door to persuade individuals to join. However, not everyone who submitted a request was admitted to the QQ groups, as a high level of caution was exercised in admitting members. Each request was given a careful background check in terms of relevance, motivation to engage, and clear interest in participating. Because each group was formed with a set goal of contention, admission to a group was preconditioned on proof of identity and residence so that these individuals could be veritable targets of collective action.

Each QQ group is managed by about a dozen of administrators, who play the role of gatekeepers and moderators in overseeing its day-to-day flow of communication. In order to maintain cohesion, groups enforce a strict policy of restricting the scope of communication to topics highly related to the issues of contention. We tracked the streams of messages for a few selective months in each group from 2015 to 2018 and found that 80% to 85% of the threads were closely focused on the chosen issues at hand. From time to time, a small number of individuals may send out commercial spam or messages totally unrelated to designated group activities, to which group administrators and other members will issue warnings. Repeated offenders risk having their membership terminated. At the same time, messages deemed to have the potential to demoralize or derail group activities are typically deflated or debunked by fellow members. Indeed, over the duration of our research, we observed a number of individuals being kicked out of these QQ groups for distributing commercial messages, being uninterested in group actions, having anti-group interests, or being suspected of spying.

In the process of gaining membership and recruiting interviewees in the QQ groups, we noticed an unmistakable pattern of an increasing level of excruciating scrutiny commensurate with the degree of difficulty and sensitivity corresponding to the type of contentious action each group hinges upon. Entry to Group A met with the lowest hurdle, while membership in Groups B and C had to be obtained through recommendation and assurance of other group members to group administrators. Joining Group D was the most tortuous, facilitated by the researcher's active participation in offline protest activities on numerous occasions.

Participants from Group A were the most receptive to interview solicitations, while those in Group D were the most uncooperative. As a matter of fact, the researcher who conducted the bulk of the interviews was discontinued from Groups B and D by group administrators upon receiving complaints from members who were being contacted for possible interviews. Confirmation of no evil intention and verification of credentials on the part of the researcher by multiple good-standing members in the respective groups helped the researcher to reenter these groups. Similarly, the researcher's participation in numerous on-site protests facilitated the interview process, as a number of interviewees requested proof of presence in field protests prior to agreeing to be interviewed.

4.2. The Power of Soft Information

Like most other communal practices, QQ groups cultivate a collective sense of "shared awareness," which is defined by Shirky (2008, pp. 35–36) as "the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand but also understand that everyone else does, too." This shared awareness starts with, but extends beyond, simply informational sharing. The majority of the interviewees confirmed the usefulness of and their dependence on these QQ groups for obtaining information in relation to the group-specific points of focus. The sentiment is best echoed by an interviewee from Group D, who was amazed to learn from the group that "other people feel the same way as I do" against building the waste incinerator in the vicinity.

Although it is often possible for members to obtain similar information from other sources, the content resonates better with the individuals when it comes (even if it may be a repost from elsewhere) from one of their own. Additionally, there is also a sizable chunk of information that is only available from the group, such as insiders' backdoor updates (many members have friends

or acquaintances in local government branches who often share first-hand information from within the government) and what has worked and what has not in similar campaigns in other places. Reposted information is often annotated and made relevant to the situation at hand, adding a personal touch and customized appeal. Some information is actionable, as illustrated by the circulation of tips in Group D on which specific government officials (with decision power) to appeal to, and the sharing of personnel profiles in Groups B and C with explanations on whom to target in making complaints.

4.3. Group Psyche, Emotional Contagion, and the Egalitarian Spirit

QQ groups provide a viable venue for collective support under varied circumstances. In specific relevance to contentious action, group affiliation conduces to the development and maintenance of close emotional relationships. We found two persistent thematic lines among the interviewees: When things go well, QQ groups become a platform for members to send out self-congratulatory, uplifting, and sometimes electrifying rally calls in moving forward; at times of hiccups and setbacks, quite a few members indicate that QQ groups help them "just let it out," stay upbeat, and work out ways to fight on. A Chinese idiom that has been mentioned multiple times is that, under circumstances of hardship, being in the same group strengthens the sense of camaraderie and allows members to "huddle together for warmth" (抱团取暖). This is aptly summarized by one member in Group D, who was surprised that "many people [in the group] share my anger and frustration over the incinerator plan. Chatting with them gives me the emotional release with like-minded individuals." On the positive end, a participant from Group C said that battling together "builds a connection that runs deeper than just among neighbors. It gratifies me that I have these people living next door."

Interaction within groups and participation in collective activities also have the spillover effects of strengthening interpersonal relatedness and group cohesion. As people get to know one another on a more intimate level, the relationships among many may naturally evolve from weak ties to close connections. Quite a few interviewees mentioned that they developed long-term relations and congenial friendships with QQ group members through weekend excursions, family trips, and other socializing events that are not directly related to contentious missions. As one informant in Group B remarked: "As someone who recently relocated, the QQ group gives me a great opportunity to be friends with like-minded people in the neighborhood."

The culture of QQ groups thrives on an egalitarian spirit that encourages peer-to-peer, open, and democratic participation. Interviewees expressed very few concerns or qualms about contributing to the discussions if they so choose. The fact that QQ allows users to anonymize their identity eases individual participation because they do not have to worry how friends or colleagues may judge them based on brazen expressions of opinions or suggestions. As it pans out, participation in collective action, especially when it involves contention with powerful corporate or state interests, works best on the principle of voluntariness rather than coercion. There is also a noticeable spillover or contagious effect across the groups in terms of the spirit of activism because multiple individuals, who did not seem to be heavily involved in most other aspects of group activities, said that the dedication and passion they sensed from fellow activists precipitated their participation.

However, this egalitarian spirit hinges on the presumption that there is a willingness to act, which is the primary goal of each group. Individuals are allowed to debate what they think are the best tactics of action, but any speeches that may disrupt the group goal of taking action meet with decisive resistance from most members. Dissenters are often spiraled into silence by the will of the majority, a trend that is well noted by this activist in Group D: "Whenever there is voice questioning the need to take action, or the tendency to sink group morale, it will mostly meet with denunciation by the majority. After a few occurrences, dissenting voice is completely silenced in group conversations."

4.4. Action-Centered and Activist-Brokered Networks

The ultimate benchmark of success for each QQ group is to mobilize members into collective action in order to achieve their respective goals. A common thread we have noted is that there are meticulously coordinated activities in planning for events and mobilizing participation. Because residents moving to these newly established residential districts hail from diverse backgrounds and origins, this poses a major barrier to organizing and mobilizing for action. This leads multiple interviewees to conclude that "none of the protests would have been possible without this QQ group." One interviewee from Group B said that "the QQ group has been extremely helpful [in reaching our goals]. Without it, I would have lost my apartment [under contract]."

Events and activities all four groups organize include written and online appeals, petitions to the local office of the Bureau for Letters and Calls (the official body in charge of public complaints), attending public hearings, engaging online and conventional media platforms, writing letters to local representatives and government officials, and collective strolling (as a special form of protest). Groups B, C, and D are also successful in staging protests in public venues, something that Group A planned to do but suspended when the major goal of the campaign succeeded prior to the need for public confrontation. Groups B and C also organized appeals and complaints to the government inspection squad from the higher authority. In particular, Group D also succeeded in organizing a few highly publicized road blockages in

protest of the local government's effort to construct a waste incinerator in the vicinity. As is the typical strategy with public protest, the whole event was videotaped via smartphones by designated members, and photos were posted via multiple platforms of social media in real time. Local media were also notified ahead of the protest.

QQ groups are used as a viable venue for contemplating and debating the details of tactics. Individual members would draft petition letters, share them with the group, offer advice on what to say at public hearings, what legal recourse they had (in the case of Groups B and C), how to contact local government agencies in sending their feedback, where to go online, and what to say to magnify their voice. Meticulous details were worked out and shared with the group as to how to act at each step.

Resource mobilization has been an important (and oftentimes make-or-break) factor in shaping collective action. Besides human and information resources, QQ groups also function as an effective platform for fund-raising in support of group contentious activities. All these groups except Group A engage vigorously in soliciting and organizing donations from both in-group and out-group sources. There is a transparent process for sharing information about money flows and expenditures, which helps in subsequent gifting. Of special note is Group D, which raised over one million Chinse yuan (approximately 158 K US dollars) from 2014 to 2017 to support event planning of public protest.

Although there is no institutional organization involved, tactical organization by a core group of activists is essential in making group action possible through painstaking preplanning. Core activists function as leaders and largely stay invisible to the larger group, in effecting a core-periphery (leader-follower) organizational structure to stage large-scale group protests and contentious activities. The core set of activists played a pivotal role in initiating each QQ group through aggressive recruiting, and they take care of the day-to-day administration of the QQ group in spearheading discussion and streamlining participation. Core activists set up dedicated channels (typically on WeChat and QQ) among themselves and often spend time together in person to contemplate, debate, and strategize. They are also essential in chartering every detail such as duration, route, and slogans to guide group members in staging public protests. Yet, they carefully choreograph online and offline activities by staying behind the scenes and avoiding publicity, mostly to avoid becoming potential targets of retribution and prosecution, as the possibility of an official crackdown cannot be dismissed.

4.5. The Cat-and-Mouse Game

Initially, all QQ groups functioned as platforms for distributing scheduled collective action events beforehand so as to maximize participation. It was quickly found out that information about planned protests was often leaked to the real estate developer (Group B), the property management (Group C), and the local police (Groups C and D) ahead of time, and carefully premeditated contentious action was thus foiled on a few occasions. Therefore, group members came to the discovery that spies for the realty developer (Group B) and property management (Group C) infiltrated the QQ groups, and either a government informant(s) was present or group discussions became a target of surveillance by the local police for Group D. In response, the groups changed their organizing tactics, and limited online discussions in the group to the announcement of forthcoming protest events without releasing the exact venue or date. Instead, a core set of leaders would work out the tactical details among themselves through their separate channels and then communicate these to individual activists who would subsequently resort to interpersonal networks (offline, via smartphones, or alternative channels of communication) to mobilize members for participation merely hours ahead of the planned protest on the same day. Multiple interviewees who played leading roles revealed to us that they relied on alternative channels (via separate QQ groups or WeChat groups) to discuss logistics and sensitive topics and worked out sophisticated plans on what to communicate to the larger group. This multi-tiered strategy seems to have worked smoothly for subsequent protest activities, as confirmed by our interviewees. QQ group space became an effective venue to circulate protest-related post hoc announcements in order to pep up group morale.

By contrast, Group A did not experience any disruptive intervention from its primary target of appeal (i.e., district government), most likely due to the much less sensitive nature of their demands, and members rarely resorted to public protests in addressing their grievances. Building a good school district is not substantively out of tune with the overall goal of the local authorities, even though disagreements often exist on how that may be accomplished.

4.6. Boundary-Setting

Most members in these groups are unequivocally cautious in defining the boundaries of their intended contention and stay away from proscribed territories (e.g., incendiary speech and anti-government rhetoric). Group administrators actively delete member-contributed posts that fall within the taboo category, and discussions that are deemed out of the line are immediately terminated. All groups cite excessively government documents and policies in support of their causes. Members in Group C even went to the length of quoting from President Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress as proof that what they were requesting is within the parameters of Xi's nation-building grand goal. In a couple of protests, slogans that did not match the collective cause or were out of line were confiscated by other members. This strategy of self-limiting protests and contention to their narrowly

tailored goals was mentioned repeatedly by interviewees as an effective way to fend off government retaliation.

4.7. Barriers and Inhibitors

We asked the interviewees what they perceived as the barriers and drawbacks in organizing contentious action via QQ groups. The issue receiving the most complaints is one that has persistently challenged organizers of collective action—the presence of free riders across all groups (Tilly, 1978). Interestingly, the presence of free riders correlates to the level of difficulty in the goals of the groups' contention. Participation in group discussion and contentious action is the most widespread in Group A and is the most uneven in Group D. In other words, the largest number of free riders exists in Group D, as corroborated by both our observation and the interviewee testimonials. One frustration that most activists in Group D shared with us is the number of "bystanders" in the group.

Because QQ users can easily register using pseudonames, that poses challenges to organizers of collective action on two fronts: first, it is hard to verify member identities at the time of admittance to a group; second, the veil of virtual identity makes it easier for certain members to stay inactive and refrain from participating. This harks back to the previously mentioned suspicion by multiple interviewees that the groups have been infiltrated by business and government informants. Another issue that upsets many interviewees is the perceived ubiquity of state surveillance over what happens in group discussions, and that serves as a potential deterrent for some individuals to fully engage in online chatting. Lastly, it was mentioned earlier that positive spillover may occur when members go upbeat and exhibit optimism. The reverse can be true as well, as some interviewees point out: contagion is a double-edged sword because, during times of setbacks or non-progress, pessimistic feelings from some members could dissipate quickly to others in the group, thus demobilizing individual incentives for participating in later events.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Breakneck economic development in the reform era in the past four decades has disentangled social, economic, and political relations in China and has turned the country into a hotbed of collective action. Staging public protests has become an effective way for disassociated individuals and organized groups across social sectors and geographic regions to lodge complaints and gain leverage when negotiating with state agents and powerful interest groups.

The surge of contentious activities has paralleled the explosive growth of social media use within China. As shown in the findings of our research with QQ groups, the popularization of social media tools and platforms has reenergized and redefined the landscape of contentious action.

The four QQ groups we studied here all originated from interest-based connections hailing from the same geographic areas and established their online presence as a platform for contemplating and mobilizing contentious activities. Three groups (Groups A, B, and C) pertain to the rising waves of "rightful protest" (grievances derived from claimants' unfulfilled rights; O'Brien, 2013), and one group (Group D) falls in the popular domain of environmental activism (Tai, 2018). The interconnection between these QQ groups activates and revitalizes latent communal ties related to the common pursuit of contentious goals. Interaction in these goal-oriented QQ groups has introduced new dynamics and vitality to everyday resistance and popular contention. As a special technology-enabled social space, these QQ groups all thrive on the practice of sharing—not merely informational sharing, but rather a collective sense of "shared awareness" (Shirky, 2008) that induces a regularized "everyday resistance" (Scott, 1990) among members.

What permeates the QQ zone extends beyond hard information; rather, it delivers a type of "soft information" with customized touches and tailored angles that resonate well with targeted individuals. Although many of the messages circulated in the groups may also be found elsewhere, they come with annotated interpretations made relevant to the very specific undertaking of these groups. There is also information that is only available to these respective groups, mostly backchannel updates and action-oriented tactical messages. All these messages carry special appeals among group members, because fellow members who distribute the messages necessarily have endorsed them.

Herding, which is "the alignment of thoughts or behaviours of individuals in a group (herd) through local interactions rather than centralized coordination" (Raafat et al., 2009, p. 420), has been a well-documented feature of human behavior under various circumstances. We have noted evidence pointing to varying degrees of the "ripple effect" (Barsade, 2002) in which the urge to act transfers among members of the QQ groups. Being exposed to contentious speech may cultivate a particular mentality, a lifestyle, or an attitude that spurs individuals to act in protests, as echoed in the concept of "speech cascade," which contends that "public understanding of what constitutes impermissible speech may change abruptly, sparking bandwagons of uncensored speech" (Druzin & Li, 2016, p. 369). Likewise, spontaneous eruption of mass protests may also collapse regime control from time to time, as amply evidenced in waves of mass incidents across regions in China in recent years. As our findings demonstrate, the virtual space of QQ groups provides a vital venue for individuals to sustain contemplation, coordination, and engagement in collective action.

The primary motivation for individuals to join in contentious action is interest-driven. However, the process of participating in group discussions typically leads to awakened rights consciousness and policy awareness among individuals, whereas contentious action breeds

"protest opportunism" (Chen, 2012) that exerts responsiveness to collective grievances from government and corporate authorities. Even though the protests we examined fit loosely with the "organizing without organization" prototype (Shirky, 2008), this by no means downplays the pivotal need for preemptive, painstaking down-to-earth organizing. Voluntary leadership by core activists plays an indispensable role in initiating and coordinating member participation and bringing collective action to fruition. In their important article on connective action, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) pinpoint three ideal types of organizational networks: self-organizing networks, organizationally enabled networks, and organizationally brokered networks. Our findings, however, identified a fourth type—activist-brokered networks in which core leadership from self-organizing individuals enacts periphery involvement and participation in contentious actions. Even though these leading individuals lack formal organizational affiliation, their brokerage is essential to connect disparate individuals and build strong coordination of collective action. This hybrid model of connective action crosscuts Bennett and Segerberg's (2012, p. 756) self-organizing networks and organizationally brokered networks and points to a viable roadmap toward mobilizing participation in collective contention in the era of personalized social networks, especially under the conditions of a relatively closed (controlled) communication environment. The threat of a repressive regime may be a deterrent for easily identifiable leaders of contentious politics, and this type of network structure mitigates potential risk of retribution by government authorities towards individual activists. Likewise, member-only communication in QQ groups creates a buffer against government censors and activates the contentious spirit of participants at the periphery.

QQ Zone provides a robust venue for collective discussion, deliberation, and mobilization. But social media can act as a double-edged sword, as shown by the pervasive presence of surveillance and infiltration by the government and powerful commercial entities in these QQ groups. Group leaders, who mostly hide their identities behind the virtual veil, have adopted a multi-layered mechanism of group mobilization: utilizing more secure platforms for strategizing protest among core activists, resorting to QQ groups for spreading the spirit of contention and pro-action, and relying on conventional interpersonal networks in mobilizing participation. Moreover, self-limiting the scope of collective protest through framing group demands seems to be an important consensual understanding in sustaining contentious causes.

Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of this research in that data were only gathered from four QQ groups. Findings cannot, therefore, be interpreted as representing the evolving terrains and diverse scope of popular contention in China. One important omission in our research is the domain of political protest and ideologically charged movements. Even though we noted the multi-tiered nature of communication among participating individuals, our research was confined to four specifically situated QQ groups, and we were not able to cover the complete networks of communication activists used in our data collection and analysis. Future research should expand to the investigation of multi-platform integration in the mobilization of contentious action.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

WhatsApp, Polarization, and Non-Conventional Political Participation: Chile and Colombia Before the Social Outbursts of 2019

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Abstract
Chile and Colombia are two South American countries with political and economic similarities that, during 2019, faced strong social outbursts, which translated into massive street protests and the weakening of their governments. Using data collected in the period immediately prior to the start of this social unrest, this study seeks to establish the role played by strong-tied social media—which are generally homogeneous, formed by close people, and with a high potential for influencing their members—in three phenomena associated with political conflict: (a) perceived political polarization, (b) affective polarization, and (c) non-conventional political participation. To estimate this influence, information collected through surveys in Chile in 2017 and Colombia in 2018 was used within the framework of the Comparative National Elections project. In both countries, probabilistic samples were employed to do face-to-face interviews with samples of over 1,100 people. In both countries, the results show that the use of social media with strong ties, specifically WhatsApp, tends to be related to two of the studied phenomena: perceived political polarization and non-conventional participation. An interaction is also observed between WhatsApp use and political ideology that amplifies the degree of perceived political polarization, affective polarization, and participation in one or both of the countries studied. We conclude by arguing that this dual phenomenon of polarization and participation can be problematic for democracy, since polarized groups (or groups that have the perception that there is ideological polarization in the political elite) tend to consider the position of the rest of the citizens to be illegitimate, thus undermining collective problem-solving.

Keywords
affective polarization; Chile; Colombia; non-conventional political participation; political polarization; social media; WhatsApp

Issue
This article is part of the issue “Protesting While Polarized: Digital Activism in Contentious Times” edited by Homero Gil de Zúñiga (University of Salamanca / Pennsylvania State University / Diego Portales University), Isabel Inguanzo (University of Salamanca), and Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu (Universidad de La Laguna).

1. Introduction

2019 was a year when protests rocked Chile and Colombia. At the time that massive demonstrations emerged, the two countries shared certain socio-political features. Despite these countries having experienced several decades of uninterrupted democratic life, well-established liberal economic systems, and relatively high rankings in democracy quality evaluations (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019), social discontent fueled by inequality, lack of opportunities, and the exclusion of disadvantaged social groups (United Nations, 2017), resulted in the largest public demonstrations to take place in the last decade. Also in both countries, center-right governments with low public opinion approval levels were mostly unable to process the discontent within their institutional frameworks.

A central aspect that is credited for unleashing such demonstrations and unrest was the enormous prevailing inequality in both countries. Although neither of them is among the poorest countries in Latin America, their inequality levels are strikingly high. In 2019, according to the World Bank (2022), the Gini Index for Colombia was 0.51, the highest of the countries of the OECD (2022) and the second in the region after Brazil. In the case of Chile, this indicator reached 0.5 in 2017, also one of the highest in the OECD, and above the average inequality level in Latin America (Ministry of Social Development, 2020).

Despite these common backgrounds, the social movements in these countries raised their own demands. In Chile, the replacement of the Political Constitution of 1980, established during the Augusto Pinochet regime, became one of the protestors' main objectives. In Colombia, stopping violence, reducing state corruption, and withdrawing a government bill to raise taxes were the main issues at hand. In both countries, the movements were characterized by great diversity, being carried out mostly by young people and by the constant appearance of specific demands. During the first weeks of protests, the dynamics of the movements in both countries were similar as well, resulting in clashes with the police, injured demonstrators, people killed during the protests, and a large number of detainees (Documenta, 2022; "Manifestaciones en Chile," 2019). In both places, critical transport infrastructure was destroyed: In Santiago, 118 metro stations were damaged or unable to operate, and in Colombia, 138 stations of the TransMilenio bus system were affected.

Previous literature has shown that social media plays an increasingly important role in protest and non-conventional political participation forms (Bail et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021). In this study, we seek to understand how certain types of social media use may relate to polarization and unrest. We are particularly interested in exploring how different social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp) may have differential effects on political polarization levels (affective and perceived) and mobilization based on their affordances and uses. We argue that social media platforms that are more reliant on strong social ties will disproportionately affect these political outcomes.

The underlying notion is that media platforms such as WhatsApp privilege strong-tie interactions, that is, exchanges with people that one has important connections to, are usually like oneself (homogeneous social ties), and thus have a higher likelihood of influencing. Therefore, we expect that WhatsApp use, compared to other social media, will have a stronger effect on affective political polarization and forms of non-conventional political participation. While not posing directional hypotheses, our study also inquires if WhatsApp use is related to perceived political polarization and tests its potential interactions with political ideology to explore if certain groups "benefit" more from these three outcomes.

Our research seeks to help fill the gap that exists in studies regarding the impact of social media on perceived political polarization and affective political polarization. In addition, we are (a) expanding research to other contexts, (b) analyzing different social media platforms side by side, and (c) considering the types of ties that characterize the interaction that characterize different social media platforms.

We undertake this two-country comparison since, in addition to similarities in the political context, Chile and Colombia are characterized by having comparable levels of social media penetration and use. In Chile, the most popular platforms are WhatsApp (84%), Facebook (78%), YouTube (75%), and Instagram (60%), followed by Twitter (31%; see Newman et al., 2021). In Colombia, the penetration of social media is WhatsApp (86%), Facebook (84%), YouTube (79%), and Instagram (60%), followed by Twitter (30%; see Newman et al., 2021). In both countries, the most used social media today is WhatsApp, an instant app characterized by two features, especially relevant in the Latin American context: They provide contact with strong ties (i.e familiar and close people) and are increasingly important as a source of news and political informal conversations (Valenzuela et al., 2021). Finding that platforms based on their social affordances are related to levels of political polarization and mobilization has profound implications for democratic systems' future, as it becomes increasingly difficult to offer negotiated solutions to problems in highly polarized and mobilized contexts. If in addition, as our research findings suggest, these relations are enhanced for certain parts of the political ideological spectrum, this might offer clues to practitioners on how to intervene in different political contexts to ameliorate these processes.

The data for this research was collected shortly before the social outbreaks of 2019. Both surveys are part of the Comparative National Election project and were applied in 2017 (Chile) and 2018 (Colombia). We argue that the timing of these data collections is ideal, as the elements resulting in massive protests were already in play. As Tarrow (1995) said, protest cycles

begin with a high conflict stage, which later spreads to different geographical areas and sectors of society.

Our results suggest that the use of social media platforms that privilege strong tie interactions, specifically WhatsApp, is related to perceived political polarization and non-conventional participation. Interactions are also observed between WhatsApp use and political ideology that in certain cases amplify the degree of perceived political polarization, affective polarization, and participation.

2. Polarization and Social Media

2.1. Polarization

The impact of social media use on polarization attitudes has gained scholarly attention, driven by concerns of the formation of so-called "echo chambers" on citizen communications. These echo chambers are highly homogeneous spaces of interaction and informational access, formed by a systematic selection of its members, whether consciously or not, based on political ideas and preferences. Homogeneous communication networks, compared with those that expose audiences to more diverse arguments and opinions, tend to reinforce beliefs and opinions, pushing ideological positions among people to the extreme (Bail et al., 2018; Stroud, 2010). In this manner, if homophily levels are increased in political discussions, dialogue with those who think differently is made more difficult (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2015) and polarization follows.

As polarization has been conceptualized in different ways, it is important to define clearly the phenomena under consideration. Traditionally, political polarization was understood as increased divergence in policy preferences by citizens. That is, a polarized society would be one where there are few people in the center and many people at the extremes of any given issue (Wilson, 2006). In this conceptualization of polarization as diverging issue positions, partisan media and/or homogenous sources of information were considered a source of political polarization. One problem with this conceptualization has been that despite the extremity of various positions, most people consider their views to be at the center and thus many people claim centrist positions.

Two promising ways in which polarization has been reconceptualized include perceived polarization and affective polarization. The idea of perceived polarization is that regardless of actual levels of polarization, individuals can perceive their society as polarized, and political parties to be further apart than they are, and this may have consequences in, for example, their likelihood of wanting to engage people who do not think like them in political conversation (Yang et al., 2016).

The underlying logic of perceived polarization is that the confrontational way in which the media cover politics, or extreme examples of "the other side" can make citizens believe that there are high degrees of polarization (Yang et al., 2016). In operational terms, perceived political polarization has been measured as the absolute distance that people place the main political parties on a left/right ideological scale (Hetherington & Roush, 2013).

However, polarization is not limited to beliefs about others' opinions and how extreme they might be. A second reconceptualization of polarization views it as an affective phenomenon, that is, the level of like or dislike that people hold towards those that have different views or belong to different political parties (Iyengar et al., 2012). While there have been different ways to measure affective polarization, such as by asking people to rate other partisans concerning certain attributes (i.e., intelligence, or if they are caring or not; see Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019), the most common way has been to ask citizens to gauge leaders of parties or partisans on feeling thermometers that capture "the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group" (Iyengar et al., 2012, p. 1).

Recent research has found a positive relationship between social media use and affective polarization (Lelkes, 2016). Through two experiments, Suhay et al. (2018) found that exposure to critical information about political opponents on social networks increases the levels of affective polarization. However, the relationship between social network use and political polarization is not completely clear, since polarization levels have increased even among people with fewer possibilities to access the internet and social media (Tucker et al., 2018). In this same line, the relationship between social media and polarization, or the echo chamber effect, has been questioned by recent research carried out in European countries and the United States (Garret, 2017; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). Finally, high levels of polarization can translate into high levels of incivility on newspaper websites (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017).

In a recent meta-analysis about the relationship between social media and political polarization, Kubin and von Sikorski (2021) show that the empirical findings support a positive relation between pro-attitudinal media use and polarization in the vast majority of the 121 studies analyzed (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021, p. 194). However, the authors question that these studies have focused almost exclusively on Twitter, that they mostly use data collected in the United States, that some research shows social media impact on polarization is low, and that only selective exposure to content is usually measured. For these reasons they conclude: "The true effect of social media exposure on political polarization remains unclear" (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021, p. 195).

2.2. The Strength of Ties Perspective on Social Influence

In this context of homophily levels and incivility linked to polarization, it is important to consider an attribute of social interactions: the strength of ties between people interacting on social media. The concept was popularized by Granovetter (1973) with an innovative description of

society as a complex network drawn up by a multitude of micro-networks of "strong ties," the closest and most intimate groups of individuals, that are interconnected by "weak ties," the relationships with a less intense relation (Coleman, 1988).

Numerous studies have shown that considering the strength of ties contributes to a better understanding of social networks' political influence (Bello & Rolfe, 2014). However, there are controversies regarding which are the most influential networks, something that could be explained by different theoretical mechanisms explaining how social environments impact their members' attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Ladini et al., 2020).

When analyzing social networks as access routes to political information, strong and weak networks make differentiated contributions. For a common citizen, access to the necessary information to form an opinion and make decisions can be overwhelming. Given that politics is a subject in which some citizens show little interest, people would be especially willing to use their social networks as a "shortcut" to access political information. Asking family, friends, or acquaintances saves time, and also refers to sources perceived as more reliable than mass media and messages from politicians (Huckfeldt et al., 2004).

In this line, strong networks can play a central role by concentrating on the people citizens trust the most (Ladini et al., 2020). However, it is usually in weak ties that people find novel and more diverse information, as network diversity is negatively associated with the strength of its ties (Granovetter, 1973).

The power of social pressure seems to be particularly relevant for political behaviors because, as Sinclair (2012, p. 1) states, "when friends and family talk about politics, they refer to strictly personal norms of civic behavior, and in close personal relationships it is difficult to disagree about such beliefs." Tabletop discussions on public issues thus socialize elements that are more significant and lasting than the information or opinions that are shared.

Following this line of reasoning, recent studies have shown that the nature of the ties in communication environments is closely linked to digital technologies (or specific social media) used by the same individuals. Twitter is an application where people can follow an almost infinite number of others, without the approval filter of the owner of each account. This tends to connect with weaker and more diverse ties. Facebook, in contrast, requires reciprocal approval to connect individuals, a condition that does not limit the network of each owner to strong ties but is connected with the inclusion of a proportion of stronger relations (Valenzuela et al., 2018). Finally, WhatsApp has been described as the most controlled, closed, and intimate massive social network, since communication requires a mobile number and this information is more generally shared with closer ties (Chan, 2018).

The positive influence of strong ties in polarization and non-conventional political participation can be explained by the characteristics of these links: They are associated with an increase in social capital and allow a greater amount of support to be delivered to people (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). According to Krämer et al. (2021), compared to weak ties, strong ties generated in social networks provide both emotional and informational support.

2.3. Strong Ties and WhatsApp in Latin America

Among social media, the one that is clearly characterized by maintaining strong ties between its members is WhatsApp, since it is made up of communication channels usually made up of close people and with a potential influence among its members. Over the last years, WhatsApp has gained attention in the political communication field as a new "semi-public space," due to its increasing usage and its unique features which provides new ways of access to news information and interpersonal political discussion. Indeed, WhatsApp in most countries is the dominant instant messaging app, particularly in Latin American, Southeast Asian, and Southern European countries. Currently, WhatsApp usage in Latin America has grown beyond that of Facebook (Newman et al., 2021), notably so in Colombia (86%) and Chile (84%).

WhatsApp allows all age cohorts users to interact, compartmentalize, and maintain their strong ties (i.e family, friends, colleagues), interacting privately with individual contacts or clearly pre-defined groups, in a context of permanent connections which could afford social support and emotional involvement (Chan, 2018). It enables contact in more intimate, closed, and controlled environments (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021). These affordances of WhatsApp would fit well with Latin American social capital configuration, based on strong ties with familiar and closed relationships (Valenzuela et al., 2008).

However, as Valenzuela et al. (2021) have established recently, by examining the Chilean case, and Matassi et al. (2019) by examining the Argentinian one, Latin American users are adopting WhatsApp not only for social purposes but also to inform and maintain political conversations.

As Reuters Institute described in a recent report (Newman et al., 2021), WhatsApp is one of the most used apps as a source of news in Latin America, especially in Colombia (45%), Brazil (43%), Chile, and Argentina (36% in both countries). In general terms, Facebook continues to be the main social media source of information, but users are more likely to take part in private discussions about news through WhatsApp (Newman et al., 2021). Indeed, literature has shown that WhatsApp enables not only a more fluid conversational setting, but also a more multimodal space—where exchanges can include texts, audio, videos, images, and/or links (Matassi et al., 2019).

The latter is especially relevant in Latin American countries such as Chile and Colombia, since given the

disaffection of their citizenry with political institutions and disappointment with how democracy is working (Pew Research Center, 2017) many turn to the strong social networks embodied through WhatsApp to discuss politics and corrective collective action. A more incidental and personal communication, provided by an instant message app such as WhatsApp, could facilitate more contact with political news and topics, in the manner evidenced by Valenzuela et al. (2021).

Moreover, some recent literature has focused on studying the association between consuming information and discussing politics via mobile instant messaging platforms and political engagement. In general terms, the research evidence points towards an interpersonal digital discussion about political issues having a positive impact on public life (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). As Vermeer et al. (2021, p. 3) claim, "instant messaging apps have changed the ways in which people talk about politics.''

In this regard, new evidence has shown political conversations through WhatsApp could have a positive influence on activism, protest, and expressive forms of political participation, and a subtler impact or mixed evidence on conventional participation (i.e., voting intention and political participation) in various countries (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2021).

However, potential negative effects are less researched. In the current complex media ecology, the convergence of mass interpersonal communication, including via digital platforms, could foster political participation but could also contribute to undesirable reactions such as political extremity and distrust (Shah et al., 2017). In this sense, interactions on WhatsApp "may not be immune" to this type of risk (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021, p. 15) and some studies show that WhatsApp may be related to forms of mis/disinformation (de Freitas Melo et al., 2019) and hate speech (Binder et al., 2020). Valenzuela et al. (2021) did not find evidence to link WhatsApp usage with extreme positions. However, this research only measured levels of polarization of WhatsApp members, but not their perception of the ideological placement of the main political parties and the affective polarization regarding party leaders.

The literature has established that offline and online informal network conversations could influence political attitudes in general. However, the main point here is whether WhatsApp usage could affect one specific type of attitude: the perception of polarization regarding the political system. Based on the revised literature, it makes sense to predict that:

H1: Social media that allow establishing strong ties between their users, such as WhatsApp, have a stronger relationship with affective polarization.

RQ1: Is the relation between perceived political polarization and the use of social media characterized by strong ties interaction more significant (WhatsApp)?

Several studies have shown the positive relationship between ideology and polarization. Using data from the World Values Surveys corresponding to 70 countries and 80% of the world population, Dalton (2006) established that the ideological dimension left/right has a strong relation with polarization, especially in developing countries. In the same way, Kashima et al. (2021) showed that ideological engagement is positively related to higher levels of polarization and that the use of social media tends to increase and accelerate polarization. In addition, a survey experiment conducted by Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) concluded that ideology fuels affective polarization.

In addition, different studies have shown that the ideological position of people is related to the probability that they participate in non-conventional political participation, seeking changes in the social order (Buechler, 2000; Klandermans, 2004; Zald, 2000). For this reason, it is relevant to study if certain ideological groups will be more likely to use a strong tie network app in ways that result in increased polarization. Thus, we pose the following research questions:

RQ2: Is there an interaction between strong-tie social media use and political ideology with respect to affective polarization?

RQ3: Is there an interaction between strong-tie social media use and political ideology with respect to perceived political polarization?

3. Social Media and Non-Conventional Political Participation

Citizen activism is crucial in democratic regimes (Verba et al., 1995, p. 1). Activism is part of non-institutional political participation. In general terms, political participation can be understood as any activity that can affect political decisions (Van Deth, 2014). Although voting is the most usual form of political participation, there are a variety of ways to influence politics (Dalton, 2006). Protests, blocking streets, boycotting, and community activities are a few activities that citizens do to express their discomfort (Theocharis & Van Deth, 2018).

Research suggests that social media use relates to citizen involvement in politics. A recent meta-analysis conducted by Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) concluded that there is a positive relationship between social media use and political participation. Social networks allow people to participate in numerous forms of offline non-conventional political participation and protest (Theocharis & Van Deth, 2018). Social media have different affordances that facilitate political participation. They allow access to a large number of contacts and diminish the costs and time spent on the mass distribution of information and organization of protest strategies. Social media also promote the creation of groups of people with similar interests (Hargittai, 2007) and, at the

same time, the interaction between people who do not know each other but have similar ideas. Access to political information through social media can increase political engagement, even when people are only incidentally exposed to such information (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

The relation between social media and political participation and non-conventional political participation is contingent, i.e., it does not operate in all cases in the same way. Studies have shown that different platforms, like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, or others, can have different levels of relevance. How people use social media (information consumption, entertainment, creating content, talking with other users, among others) may also have different relevance.

Social networks are part of what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) call the logic of connective action that characterizes modern democracies. This means that people can organize themselves autonomously, outside traditional structures such as political parties. This is especially relevant in countries such as Chile and Colombia, where political parties have a low level of trust among citizens.

After reviewing the association between social media and different forms of participation, we will now analyze the relationship between these platforms and political and non-conventional political participation by posing the following hypothesis and research question:

> H2: Social media that allow users to establish strong ties, such as WhatsApp, have a stronger relationship with non-conventional political participation.

> RQ4: Is there an interaction between strong-tie social media use and political ideology with respect to non-conventional political participation? Do certain groups benefit disproportionately from social media affordances in their mobilizing efforts?

4. Methodology

4.1. Data Sample

To test our hypothesis, we use surveys of the Comparative National Elections project conducted in Chile and Colombia.

In Chile, the survey was applied between November and December 2017, immediately after the first round of the 2017 presidential election (in 2018). The study used a probabilistic sample of 1,625 people aged 18 and over, living in the three main national urban centers: Metropolitan Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción. These areas contain 62% of the Chilean population. Questionnaires were applied face to face, with a 25% response level. The survey was conducted by the Diego Portales University and Feedback, a professional polling firm.

In Colombia, the study was applied between June and July 2018, to a probabilistic sample of 1,118 people aged 18 and over living in 10 regions of the country. Questionnaires were applied face-to-face, with a 30% response level. The survey was conducted by the University of Wisconsin, the Externado de Colombia University, and the polling firm Deproyectos.

Both surveys were carried out in urban areas. In Chile, 88% of the population lives in urban areas, while in Colombia this figure is 75%. The urban nature of the population in both surveys allows for an adequate comparison, but most importantly as the rural population represents a very small fraction of the population in both countries, we argue that their exclusion does not affect the results of this study, yet future studies may establish whether a different model applies to rural populations.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Dependent Variables

The variable *perceived political polarization* corresponds to the average of the absolute difference of individuals' evaluations regarding the main government party and the main opposition political party on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is "left" and 10 is "right." To the extent that the value of perceived political polarization is larger, this means that there is a perception that political parties are more polarized. On the other hand, if the value is close to 0, the perception among citizens is that the polarization between the parties in their country is low.

The perceived political polarization score is calculated as:

$$\textit{perceived political polarization} = \frac{\sum |X_1 - X_2|}{n}$$

where X_1 is the evaluation of the main leftist party, X_2 is the evaluation of the main rightist party, and n is the sample size. In Chile, the final score was 5.4 (SD = 3.1). In Colombia it was 4.7 (SD = 3.4).

In Chile, the main political party on the left axis was the Socialist Party (M = 2.9) and on the right side was the Renovación Nacional (M = 7.8). In Colombia, the main leftist party was Polo Democrático (M = 3.51) and the most important party on the right was Partido de la U. Two criteria were used to establish the largest left and right parties: (a) the results of the parliamentary elections in Chile in 2017 and in Colombia in 2018 and (b) the preferences that respondents have for political parties. Both results were coincident. The seats obtained were not used as an indicator because in non-parliamentary systems what is usually recognized is the percentage of votes obtained by the parties or their level of adherence in polls.

For perceived political polarization we used a measure that has been widely employed in the past in multinational studies (see, for example, Singer, 2016; Torcal & Magalhães, 2022; Yang et al., 2016). This measure is detailed in the literature review prepared by Tucker et al. (2018, p. 8). Fiorina (2016) utilized a methodology

very similar to measure polarization in the US Congress. We follow this literature and contend that it captures the perception of ideological polarization regarding the most important political parties in a country.

However, it is true that this measure (originally designed to study polarization in two-party or parliamentary political systems) has some drawbacks when used in presidential and multi-party systems, such as those in Chile and Colombia. The measure employed simplifies the political space and leaves out relevant parties, but despite this limitation, we believe that for generalizability it is better to use established measures.

For the variable *affective polarization*, we calculated the absolute difference in evaluations for the leader of the government and the leader of the opposition party, on a scale where 1 corresponds to "the least favorable" and 10 to "the most favorable'':

$$\textit{affective polarization} = \frac{\sum |X_1 - X_2|}{n}$$

where X_1 is the score of the leader of the government, X_2 is the score of the opposition leader, and n is the sample size. In Chile, the score was 4.2 (SD = 3.2). In Colombia it was 4.9 (SD = 3.4).

For our third dependent variable, *non-conventional political participation*, we aggregated the number of political and social activities that people participated in at least once in the last 12 months. In Chile, we considered in the variable 10 different activities (protests, signing a petition addressed to an authority, defending the environment, fighting for sexual minorities' rights, etc.). In Colombia, we considered nine similar activities for the variable (Chile: M = 1.0, SD = 1.7; Colombia: M = 1.4, SD = 1.9).

4.2.2. Independent Variables

In both countries we used a scale for *WhatsApp use*, where 1 is "minimum possible" use and 4 is "maximum use" (Chile: M = 3.2, SD = 1.3; Colombia: M = 3.38, SD = 0.7).

We used a binary variable to assess whether the respondent *has or does not have a Twitter account* (Chile: Yes = 10.5%; Colombia: Yes = 16%).

Likewise, we used a binary variable again to establish whether respondents *have do not have a Facebook account* (Chile: Yes = 60.9%; Colombia: Yes = 72.4%).

4.2.3. Control Variables

To control for *media news use* and the impact of news media consumption on the dependent variables, we incorporated the informative use of media: television, radio, newspapers, and the internet. In Chile and Colombia, we utilized a scale where 0 is the minimum use and 5 is the maximum use (Chile: TV, M = 2.5, SD = 1.3; radio, M = 2.2, SD = 1.7; newspapers, M = 1.8, SD = 1.5; internet, M = 1.9, SD = 1.6; Colombia: TV, M = 3.6, SD = 1.5; radio, M = 1.8, SD = 1.8; newspapers, M = 1.9, SD = 1.7; internet, M = 2.2, SD = 1.9). Due to the high correlation that existed in the consumption of news among some of these media, especially in Chile, we chose to create a single variable that will gather the consumption of news from these outlets. In both countries, an index was created by averaging the consumption of each of the four aforementioned media (Chile: M = 1.1 , SD = 1.22, Cronbach's Alpha = 0.8; Colombia: M = 2.4, SD = 1.12, Cronbach's Alpha = 0.6). This measure is used in other research, such as Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2021).

For *political and economic variables* we first incorporated a variable of political interest on a scale between 0 and 3, where 0 is the lowest possible interest and 3 is the highest possible interest (Chile: M = 1.0, SD = 1.1; Colombia: M = 1.4, SD = .9). We also used respondents' ideology identification. The original question asked respondents to place-rank themselves on the left/right scale, where 1 was left and 10 was right. Since in the Chilean case approximately 23% of the sample was not classified within the scale and did not answer the question, we opted to recode it into four categories:

- Left (Chile = 22%; Colombia = 13.6%)
- Enter (Chile = 42.5%; Colombia = 58.6%)
- Right (Chile = 12.4%; Colombia = 21.2%)
- Without political identification (Chile = 23.1%, Colombia = 6.6%)

Additionally, we include a question about the perception of the general economic situation in the country. It is a binary variable where 1 means having a positive evaluation and 0 means not having a positive evaluation (Chile = 16.6%; Colombia = 7.2%).

Finally, we incorporated three *sociodemographic variables* in the model: Gender (Women Chile = 52.3%; Women Colombia = 53.2%), age (Chile: M = 44.3, SD = 17.4; Colombia: M = 42.5, SD = 15.8), and education. The distribution of education levels is as follows: primary education (Chile = 12.9%; Colombia = 10.9%), secondary education (Chile = 44.5%; Colombia = 41.3%), technical education (Chile = 16.2%; Colombia = 19.7%), and university education (Chile = 26.4%; Colombia = 28.1%).

4.3. Statistical Approach

To test the hypothesis and research questions of this study we employed generalized linear models because our dependent variables are linear but do not meet the assumptions required to perform a traditional linear regression, with the OLS method. We use general linear models to calculate the regression analyses and plot the interactions of interest.

To show the validity of our regression models, the covariates correlation in Chile and Colombia are reported below. The analyses show that variables do not present collinearity problems (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Chile: Covariates correlation (Pearson coefficient).

	Political interest	Media news frequency	WhatsApp use frequency	WhatsApp use frequency * left
Political interest	1	0.032	.092**	.153**
Media news use		1	−.080**	−0.047
WhatsApp use			1	.203**
WhatsApp use * left				1

Note: **p < .01.

Table 2. Colombia: Covariates correlation (Pearson coefficient).

	Political interest	Media news frequency	WhatsApp use frequency	WhatsApp use frequency * left
Political interest	1	.256**	0.045	.209**
Media news use		1	.146**	0.017
WhatsApp use			1	.166**
WhatsApp use * left				1

Note: **p < .01.

5. Results

We first explored and compared the determinants of affective polarization (H1). Table 3 shows that none of the social media measured in this study are related to affective polarization in Chile or Colombia. This means that there is no evidence to support H1. However, in Chile, the interaction between WhatsApp usage frequency and a leftist political position has a positive relationship with affective polarization (RQ2). This finding

Table 3. Determinants of affective polarization.

	Chile		Colombia	
Constant	1.169**	1.432**	1388	1588
	(0.442)	(0.455)	(0.892)	(0.904)
Woman (=1)	0.346*	0.344*	−0.246	−0.244
	(0.151)	(0.150)	(0.216)	(0.216)
Age (years)	0.026***	0.026***	0.017*	0.017*
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Secondary education (ref. primary)	0.037	−0.006	0.555	0.529
	(0.245)	(0.246)	(0.497)	(0.497)
Technical education	−0.002	−0.009	0.748	0.711
	(0.290)	(0.290)	(0.520)	(0.520)
University education	0.290	0.279	0.986	0.956
	(0.273)	(0.273)	(0.515)	(0.515)
Positive perception economy	0.918***	0.902***	−0.291	−0.307
	(0.202)	(0.202)	(0.398)	(0.398)
Ideology: Left (ref. NA)	1.811***	0.733	2.754***	1268
	(0.238)	(0.513)	(0.586)	−1248
Ideology: Center	−0.115	−0.112	0.064	0.087
	(0.206)	(0.206)	(0.523)	(0.523)
Ideology: Right	2.984***	2.993***	0.881	0.905
	(0.272)	(0.272)	(0.556)	(0.556)
Political interest	0.265***	0.265***	0.389**	0.376**
	(0.080)	(0.080)	(0.122)	(0.122)

Table 3. (Cont.) Determinants of affective polarization.

	Chile		Colombia	
Media news use	−0.092	−0.100	0.064	0.070
	(0.062)	(0.062)	(0.102)	(0.102)
Facebook	0.391	0.381	0.396	0.382
	(0.202)	(0.202)	(0.312)	(0.312)
Twitter	0.003	0.0005	0.154	0.158
	(0.249)	(0.248)	(0.287)	(0.287)
WhatsApp use	0.073	0.002	0.282	0.203
	(0.078)	(0.084)	(0.160)	(0.170)
Left * WhatsApp use		0.334*		0.610
		(0.140)		(0.452)
N	1,527	1,527	887	887
Log Likelihood	−3,880.03	−3,877.190	−2,268.190	−2,267.264
AIC	7,790.070	7,786.381	4,566.380	4,566.528

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

can be seen in Table 3 and Figure 1. In Colombia, this variable does not turn out to be significant. Other important variables to explain affective polarization are age, political position, and interest in politics.

Unlike our observations on affective polarization, our results also show that strong tie networks, such as those provided by WhatsApp, are the ones with a stronger relationship with perceived political polarization (see Table 4 and Figure 2). In Chile, this finding is bolstered by the negative relation between having a Twitter account, which is a social media outlet characterized by its weak ties, and the dependent variable. These results allow us to answer RQ1 affirmatively. Another important finding is the result of the interaction between WhatsApp use frequency and having leftist political positions: Table 4 and Figure 3 show clearly in the Colombian case how the interaction between these variables has a positive relationship with perceived political polarization. Having a leftist political position acts as a moderator that increases the probability that people who frequently use WhatsApp perceive a greater ideological distance between political leaders (RQ3). The most interesting result among the control variables, similar for both countries, is that belonging to the highest educated sectors is a predictor of perceiving greater political polarization.

The results of Table 5 partially support H2, since only WhatsApp has a positive and significant relationship with social and non-conventional political participation,

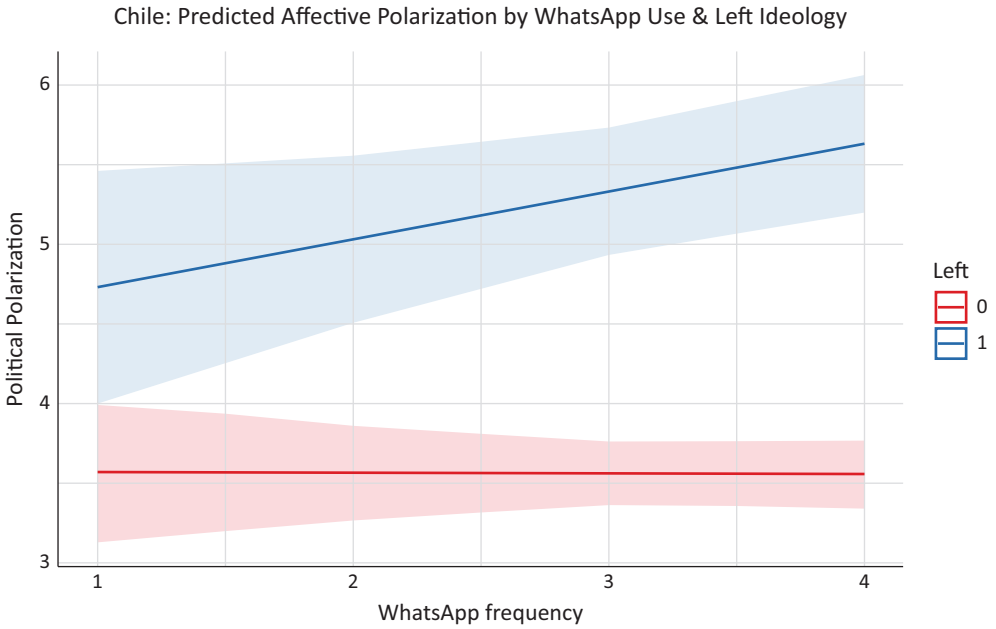

Figure 1. Predict values of affective polarization in Chile according to WhatsApp frequency and political position (left).

Table 4. Determinants of perceived political polarization.

	Chile		Colombia	
Constant	3.644***	3.960***	0.520	0.503
	(0.559)	(0.576)	−1360	−1370
Woman (=1)	0.108	0.112	−0.166	−0.166
	(0.178)	(0.178)	(0.240)	(0.240)
Age (years)	0.030***	0.030***	0.027**	0.027**
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Secondary education (ref. primary)	0.082	0.013	1183	1184
	(0.315)	(0.316)	(0.609)	(0.610)
Technical education	0.615	0.593	1.303*	1.305*
	(0.361)	(0.360)	(0.628)	(0.629)
University education	0.994**	0.971**	2.050**	2.051**
	(0.338)	(0.338)	(0.626)	(0.627)
Positive perception economy	−0.310	−0.336	0.037	0.039
	(0.232)	(0.232)	(0.438)	(0.439)
Ideology: Left (ref. NA)	−0.652⁎	−1.844**	0.677	0.812
	(0.314)	(0.613)	−1047	−1617
Ideology: Center	−0.478	−0.481	−0.708	−0.712
	(0.280)	(0.280)	−1008	−1009
Ideology: Right	−0.193	−0.188	0.506	0.502
	(0.341)	(0.340)	−1027	−1028
Political interest	−0.098	−0.099	0.120	0.122
	(0.094)	(0.093)	(0.136)	(0.137)
Media news use	−0.141*	−0.152*	0.087	0.087
	(0.072)	(0.072)	(0.112)	(0.113)
Facebook	0.226	0.216	−0.245	−0.244
	(0.230)	(0.230)	(0.358)	(0.358)
Twitter	−0.598*	−0.606*	0.498	0.498
	(0.285)	(0.284)	(0.310)	(0.311)
WhatsApp use	0.206*	0.123	0.718***	0.725***
	(0.090)	(0.097)	(0.182)	(0.195)
Left * WhatsApp use		0.369*		−0.056
		(0.163)		(0.510)
N	1,175	1,175	770	770
Log Likelihood	−3,030.381	−3,027.788	−1,998.053	−1,998.046
AIC	6,090.763	6,087.576	4,026.105	4,028.093

Notes: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

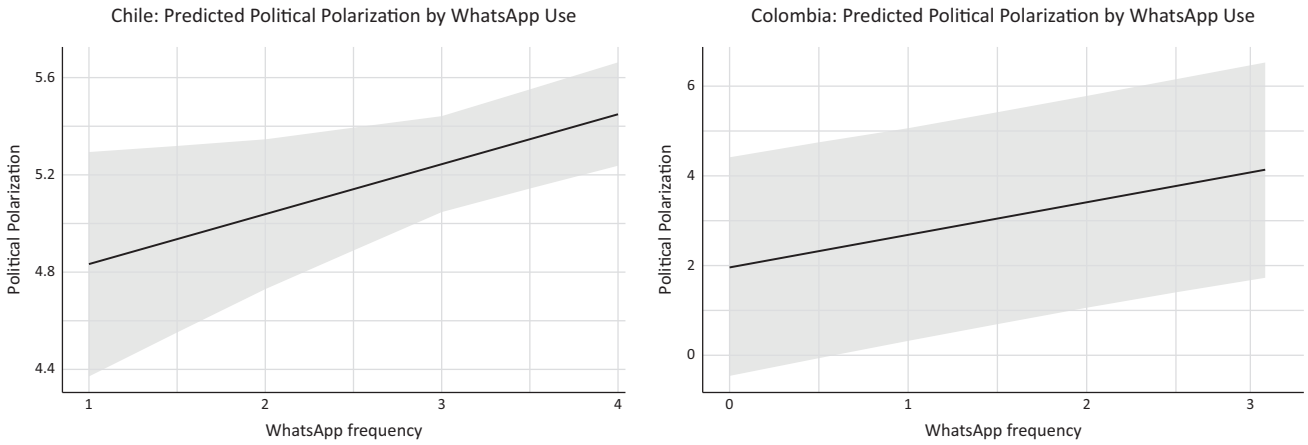

Figure 2. Predicted values of perceived political polarization according to WhatsApp usage frequency.

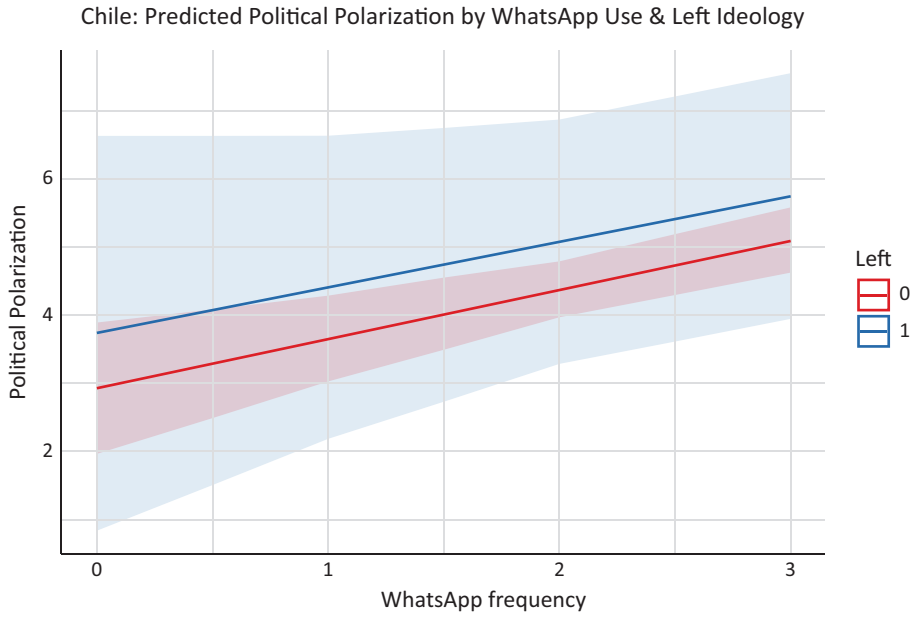

Figure 3. Predicted values of perceived political polarization in Colombia according to WhatsApp usage frequency and political position (left).

Table 5. Determinants of non-conventional political participation.

	Chile		Colombia	
Constant	0.219 (0.352)	0.202 (0.365)	−0.605 (0.750)	−0.344 (0.750)
Woman (=1)	−0.110 (0.107)	−0.111 (0.108)	0.192 (0.133)	0.188 (0.132)
Age (years)	0.0001 (0.004)	0.0001 (0.004)	0.003 (0.005)	0.003 (0.005)
Secondary education (ref. primary)	−0.186 (0.193)	−0.183 (0.195)	−0.041 (0.336)	−0.059 (0.334)
Technical education	−0.194 (0.221)	−0.192 (0.221)	0.336 (0.347)	0.308 (0.345)
University education	−0.275 (0.207)	−0.273 (0.208)	0.481 (0.348)	0.468 (0.346)
Positive perception economy	0.382** (0.141)	0.383** (0.141)	0.303 (0.245)	0.277 (0.244)
Ideology: Left (ref. NA)	0.582 * * (0.201)	0.635 (0.375)	−0.060 (0.580)	−2.121* (0.887)
Ideology: Center	0.301 (0.179)	0.301 (0.179)	−0.557 (0.554)	−0.499 (0.552)
Ideology: Right	0.231 (0.222)	0.230 (0.223)	−0.564 (0.565)	−0.503 (0.563)
Political interest	0.337*** (0.057)	0.337*** (0.057)	0.347*** (0.076)	0.323*** (0.076)
Media news use	−0.031 (0.044)	−0.031 (0.044)	0.408*** (0.062)	0.418*** (0.062)
Facebook	−0.255 (0.141)	−0.254 (0.141)	−0.083 (0.199)	−0.103 (0.198)
Twitter	0.113 (0.169)	0.113 (0.169)	0.374* (0.173)	0.376* (0.172)
WhatsApp use	0.210*** (0.055)	0.214*** (0.060)	0.203* (0.102)	0.086 (0.109)
Perceived political polarization	−0.013 (0.018)	−0.012 (0.018)	−0.016 (0.020)	−0.016 (0.020)
Affective polarization	−0.035 (0.019)	−0.035 (0.019)	0.027 (0.021)	0.025 (0.021)
Left * WhatsApp freq.		−0.017 (0.098)		0.856** (0.280)
N	1,134	1,134	762	762
Log Likelihood	−2,329.829	−2,329.815	−1,520.185	−1,515.419
AIC	4,693.658	4,695.629	3,074.369	3,066.838

Notes: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

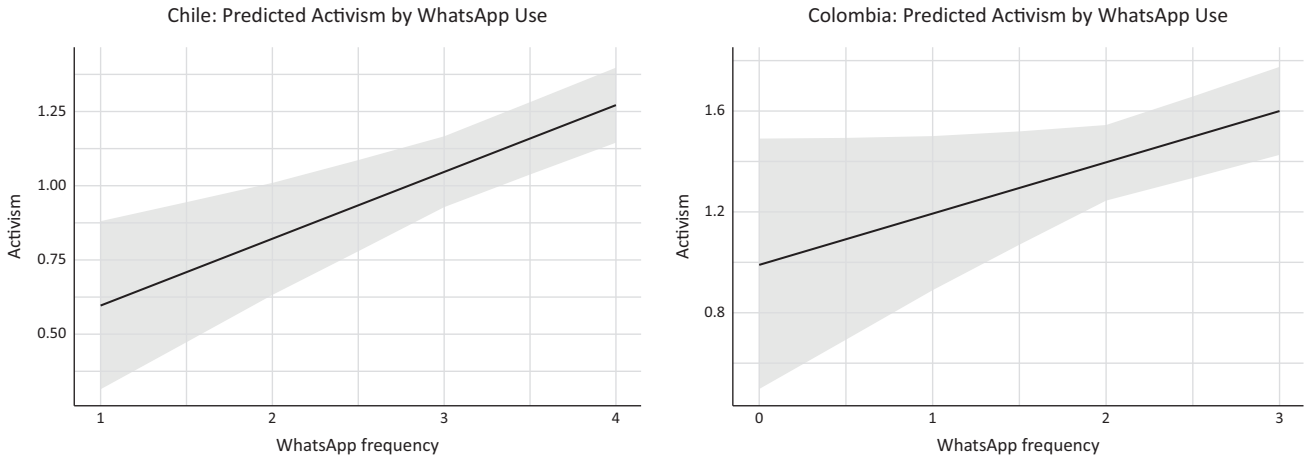

Figure 4. Predicted values of non-conventional political participation according to WhatsApp usage frequency.

while those of Facebook and Twitter are not significant (see also Figure 4). This result is in line with previous research in the area (Valenzuela et al., 2021). Finally, the answer to RQ4 is not conclusive. In Colombia, the interaction between WhatsApp use and having a leftist political position increases non-conventional political participation levels, but in Chile the same result is not registered. The interaction between WhatsApp use and a Leftist ideology in Colombia is shown in Figure 5.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Our results, taken as a whole, show the importance of WhatsApp usage in two Latin American countries for political purposes.

The overall pattern suggests that WhatsApp usage frequency is related to both polarization and political mobilization, with some particularities such as the effects being stronger for certain segments of the population or the type of polarization varying by country. Not surprisingly, there are also interesting differences. In Colombia, traditional media appears to be a mobilizing agent, but not a polarizing one, while in Chile radio news, in particular, seems to be a demobilizing and polarizing force.

While certain social media platforms, like Facebook, do not seem to contribute to perceived polarization or mobilization in either country. Twitter for the most part remains unrelated (except for perceived polarization in Chile where it seems to play a depolarizing role). WhatsApp, a chat application, does contribute. We argue that this has to do with network characteristics that are more commonly deployed in certain platforms.

While Facebook and Twitter are particularly useful in maintaining weak ties or being exposed to diverse

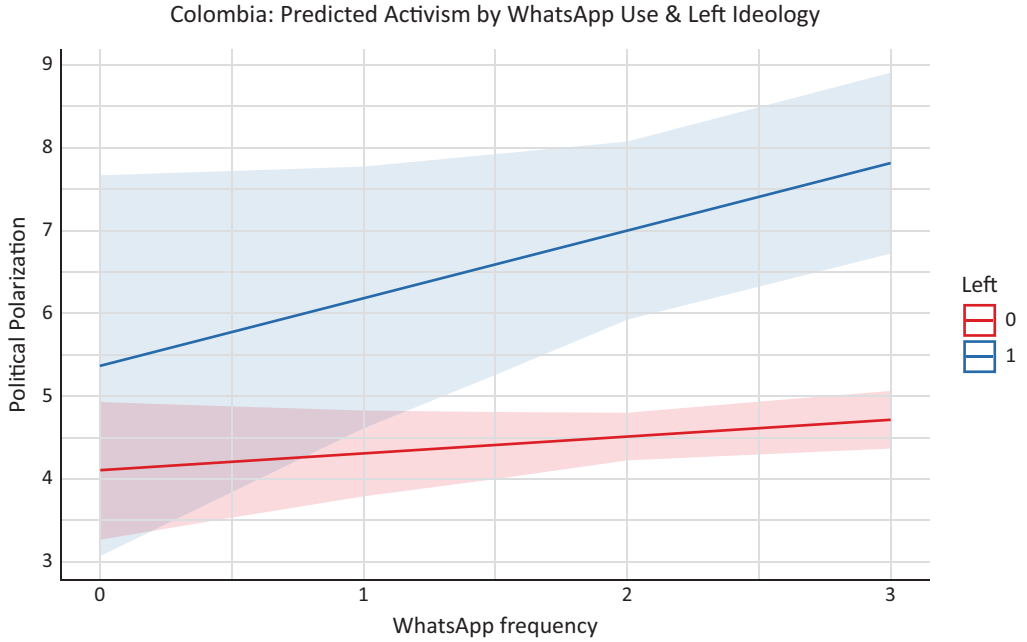

Figure 5. Predicted values of non-conventional political participation in Colombia according to WhatsApp frequency and political position (left).

information, WhatsApp is especially suitable for strong tie interaction. Our results underscore then the logic of strong tie homophily that leads to both polarization and mobilization. Our argument is not techno-deterministic but is rather based on a social structure of strong ties whose interactions are facilitated by specific platform affordances resulting in a mobilized, albeit polarized, individual.

This dual phenomenon of mobilization and polarization is problematic for democracy. In the past increased participation has been mostly conceptualized as a positive outcome. But when it is coupled with polarization this can undermine democracy itself, as the "rules of the game" come into question among polarized groups that consider their rivals illegitimate. Not surprisingly, allegations of fraud regarding electoral results are on the rise.

The information that navigates these strong tie networks may also prove to be problematic, as there are fewer possibilities of correcting mis/disinformation by impartial arbiters. Motivated reasoning processes may instead result in further reinforcement of polarized views.

Despite the limitations of our study, which examines only the urban population in two countries, uses a cross-sectional design that limits causal claims, is not able to assess the actual content of the exchanges that happen in these networks, and measures polarization focusing on the leaders of the two main political movements, we provide evidence of the relations between WhatsApp use and a mobilized polarization. In doing so we offer a compelling case of the importance of studying strong tie interactions, particularly those facilitated by chat applications. Future studies that can explore more closely what gets exchanged by participants in strong tie networks will go a long way in sorting out issues of causality, and can potentially show even stronger results, as our own findings do not allow distinctions between networks that are more homophilous and those that are less so within the same platform.

Our measure of affective polarization is widely used in recent political communication research (see, for example, Iyengar et al., 2012; Lee et al., in press; Lelkes, 2016; Stroud, 2010) as political leaders overshadow the parties themselves, in a world in which ideology means less and group belonging emerges as a prevalent galvanizing force. We argue that a leader-based approach to measuring polarization is ideal to calculate emotional polarization, yet it might simplify the political space by leaving out relevant parties. This potential limitation of our study needs future research to compare whether a party-based approach would generate different results

In our study, the platform stands in for the type of tie, which of course is a limitation of our study. Future research needs to examine variance in tie strength within different platforms since it would make sense that for someone who uses Facebook only to connect with strong ties we could expect similar usage results to what we find here. Future research also needs to examine carefully whether these findings can be replicated in other contexts. While we argue that our findings are generalizable to other societies in which we are activated by strong network ties, there could be elements of the Latin American context that may limit generalizability. In the future, it will also be necessary to estimate whether other variables, such as political discussions and the specific people with whom conversations are held on WhatsApp, play a mediating role between the use of this social media and the different forms of polarization.

Despite these limitations, we are convinced that advancing our understanding of strong tie network interactions and their relation to mobilized polarization is critical if democracies worldwide are to resist authoritarian temptations, which are so in vogue these days. Without citizens carefully assessing different options to face collective action problems, democracy withers, and current chat apps do not seem well suited for the task of revitalizing democracy.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Examining the Role of Online Uncivil Discussion and Ideological Extremity on Illegal Protest

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Abstract
In recent years, there has been an increased academic interest revolving around the beneficial or pernicious effects of ideological extremity and (uncivil) political discussion over democracy. For instance, citizens' ideological predispositions and higher levels of political discussion have been linked with a more active and vibrant political life. In fact, ideological extremity and uncivil discussion foster institutionalized political engagement. However, less explored in the literature remains whether such polarization and uncivil discussions may be related to unlawful political behavior such as illegal protest. This study contends that one of the main drivers of illegal protest behavior lies in online uncivil political discussion, specifically through the normalization and activation of further incivility. We tested this through a two-wave panel data drawn from a diverse US sample and cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive regression models. Mediation analysis was also conducted to test whether uncivil online discussion mediated the relationship between frequency of online political discussion and illegal protest engagement. Overall, we found that illegal protest was particularly associated with online uncivil discussion, while ideological extremity and other forms of online and offline discussions seemed to have no effect on unlawful protest over time.

Keywords
ideological extremity; illegal protest; online political discussion; offline uncivil discussion; online uncivil discussion

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Protesting While Polarized: Digital Activism in Contentious Times" edited by Homero Gil de Zúñiga (University of Salamanca/Pennsylvania State University/Diego Portales University), Isabel Inguanzo (University of Salamanca), and Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu (Universidad de La Laguna).

1. Introduction

In the US more people are increasingly becoming polarized, biased, politically active, and angry (Mason, 2013; West & Iyengar, 2020). Parallel to this pattern of polarization is the rise in non-violent protests (Fisher et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2021). Protest aims at bringing about social change and often takes the form of civil displays such as demonstrations, sittings, petitions, and other more or less disruptive actions (Wang & Piazza, 2016). However, not all protest is civil and legal. Some protests can break the law or turn violent.

These facts raise questions about increasing political incivility in the US. Based on Phillips and Smith (2003, p. 85), we understand political incivility as political "actions and interactions that are perceived to be rude or inconsiderate" towards others. Such a broad definition allows us to encompass a wide variety of political situations where incivility can arise, from online political discussions (Coe et al., 2014) to offline political behaviors intended to harm others (Braunstein, 2018). So, while unlawful protest can be considered an extreme act of political incivility, in this age of rampant polarization and widespread use of social media

and computer-mediated communication, the US is parallelly witnessing other uncivil behaviors online, such as uncivil discussion (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; Lee et al., 2019). These three paralleled phenomena serve as the initial puzzle for the present study: what are the antecedents of illegal protest? Do ideological extremity and/or uncivil discussions foster unlawful protest behavior or are they just correlated phenomena with no causal relation between them?

In order to answer these questions, we rely on three sets of literature: ideological extremity, political discussion, and high-risk protest behavior. Ideological extremity and political discussion were both found to foster diverse political participatory behaviors (Schussman & Soule, 2005; van der Meer et al., 2009). However, even in a polarized setting, not every political discussion might be of relevance to explaining engagement in unlawful activities. Recent studies show that sharing political content through social media, such as WhatsApp, specifically fuels illegal protests (Gil de Zúñiga & Goyanes, 2021). We argue that specifically online uncivil discussions may trigger unlawful protest. Due to social norms, uncivil discussion takes place more frequently across online than offline settings (Barnidge, 2017), and frequent exposure to uncivil discussion normalizes incivility and encourages further uncivil behavior (Hmielowski et al., 2014). We, therefore, contend that it is precisely online uncivil discussion as opposed to other forms of discussion that drives unlawful protest behavior.

In order to test this hypothesis, the present study collected two-wave data from a nationally drawn online panel survey to investigate the impact of online uncivil political discussion on illegal protest over time, controlling for ideological extremity and other forms of political discussions. More specifically, this study uses Ordinary Least Square cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive regression models to examine whether online uncivil discussion is associated with illegal protest concurrently, and over time when ideological extremity remains constant. Some mediating mechanisms are further explored. Overall, results show that uncivil online discussion is positively associated with engagement with illegal protest while ideological extremity and other forms of political discussion do not yield statistically significant effects on illegal protest over time.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Influence of Ideology on Protest Participation

Past studies have found a connection between ideology and protest participation (Kostelka & Rovny, 2019). Research has for a long time suggested that in Western and well-established democracies left-wing ideology and post-materialist values are associated with higher protest participation (Schussman & Soule, 2005; van der Meer et al., 2009), while in other regions such as Eastern Europe, protest is traditionally associated with a right-wing ideology (Borbáth & Gessler, 2020). Therefore, in many countries protest is ideologically structured.

However, Snow (2004) has warned about the risks of assuming great ideological coherence and unanimity among protest participants, which would neglect individual and group contradictions between ideology and behavior, as well as transversal collective action frames that transcend ideological categorizations. Consequently, it is not aligning with a particular ideology that drives individuals into a protest, but instead having a higher level of ideological extremity. Indeed, ideological extremity fosters all kinds of political behavior both legal and illegal (van der Meer et al., 2009; Yaziji & Doh, 2013). In extreme cases, ideological extremity can contribute to framing participation in unconventional and unlawful political activities as a moral obligation to the community (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012; Della Porta, 2018). In these cases, radical individuals might consider that a superior end justifies illegal means. As a result, high-risk protest is positively associated with ideological extremity (DiGrazia, 2014). Consequently, our first hypothesis reads as follows:

> H1: Ideological extremity is positively associated to illegal protest participation.

2.2. Online Incivility and Its Potential Role on Protest Participation

Parallelly to polarization, the US is witnessing a rise in uncivil discourse (Dodd & Schraufnagel, 2013). Although connected, the ideological polarization of certain sectors of society and the rise of uncivil discussion are separate phenomena (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020). Most of the uncivil comments revolving around newspaper stories are about "politics, law and order, taxes, and foreign affairs" (Coe et al., 2014). Consequently, researchers in the field have studied the potentially ambivalent effects of this type of political discussion on democratic attitudes and behaviors.

On the one hand, some studies point to a "political activation effect." It is well known that incivility exposure activates social and political identities (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017). In fact, in the context of protests, online uncivil discussion exposure has also been positively related to cyberbalkanization (Lee et al., 2019) and "increased identification with violent like-minded protesters through malevolence attributions" (Muddiman et al., 2021). Brooks and Geer (2007) also found that exposure to an uncivil political debate seemed to increase the political interest of the audience and the intention to vote, thus fueling political engagement. Similarly, uncivil discussion was found to foster people's intention to participate politically (Masullo Chen & Lu, 2017).

On the other hand, other research suggests a "democratic backsliding effect." Indeed, civil interactions are sometimes understood as necessary for an

orderly and democratic society (Phillips & Smith, 2003). In fact, exposure to uncivil political discussions was found to increase affective polarization, decrease political trust, and lower the expectation of public deliberation (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Hwang et al., 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Skytte, 2021). While the effects of online incivility on democracy are far from being settled (Miller & Vaccari, 2020), in this study, we argue that the combination of both effects could trigger not only uncivil protest, but also specifically illegal protest.

So far, studies have found that online uncivil political discussion renders uncivil behavior, such as flaming, acceptable, and the more acceptable incivility is perceived and normalized, the higher the intention to incur this type of uncivil behavior (Hmielowski et al., 2014). An innovative study using a combination of machine-learning tools and qualitative analysis found that violent and dehumanizing rhetoric on online platforms legitimates acts of political violence against outgroup members and increases the motivation for violent and illegal actions (Wahlström et al., 2021). Recent research found that hate speech on social media is positively associated with hate crimes on the streets (Müller & Schwarz, 2021; Williams et al., 2020). However, while the existing literature has managed to connect online incivility with illegal behaviors (e.g., crime), to our knowledge, there are no studies specifically analyzing online incivility with illegal political protest behavior. Therefore, our second hypothesis is as follows:

> H2: Online uncivil discussion is positively associated with illegal protest participation.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Online Incivility Between Online Discussion and Illegal Protest

Luckily, although online incivility is becoming more frequent, it is still a rare behavior. Previous research found that generally, not all online political discussions are equally civil, but most of them are (Papacharissi, 2004). Even more, those who frequently engage in online political discussions are more civil than rare online political discussers (Coe et al., 2014). Recent experimental evidence shows how in the context of a high issue and affective polarization, civil deliberation while not changing position on particular issues, does decrease affective polarization (Shen & Yu, 2021). Moreover, frequent online political discussion is positively related not only to democratic attitudes such as higher political efficacy (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2019), but also to civil and democratic forms of political participation, both conventional and unconventional (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021; Kwak et al., 2005; Wojcieszak, 2009).

However, the literature is both scarce and inconclusive regarding whether *regular online political discussion* fosters or discourages *particularly unlawful* political actions. On the one hand, online discussion is positively related to the willingness to stand up against out-group members (Wojcieszak, 2009). Moreover, frequent online discussions between opposed groups are positively related to more frequent violent confrontations between groups on the streets (Gallacher et al., 2021). On the other hand, there is no solid empirical evidence supporting that political discussion in online echo-chambers per se lead to offline violent extremism (O'Hara & Stevens, 2015).

We argue these mixed results could be clarified by introducing incivility into the equation. In the previous section, we argued that the style of online discussions matters in explaining illegal political acts. So, while regular online political discussions seem to foster democratic attitudes and behaviors, if these online discussions turn uncivil, the latter might reverse democratic attitudes and activate illegal protestors. As a result, we contend that to the extent that online political discussion increases the chances of being engaged in both civil and uncivil discussion, the above-mentioned mixed results of online discussion on illegal protest could be a product of the mediating role of uncivil discussion. Therefore, considering the somewhat contradictory results found in the literature between online discussion and illegal political activity, we pose the following research question:

> RQ1: Is the relationship between online discussion and illegal protest participation mediated by online uncivil discussion?

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

This study employed data from a diverse US online panel survey collected for a large research project on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of uses of new and traditional media across two waves (June 2019 for Wave 1, October 2019 for Wave 2 [hereafter W1 and W2]). The research unit at the University of Vienna contracted IPSOS Austria to provide the subjects for the survey which was fielded in the US from a nationally drawn sample. All questions in the questionnaire were administered via Qualtrics at the University of Vienna, Austria. Aiming at US national representativeness, IPSOS curates a massive opt-in panel of respondents of hundreds of thousands of US individuals. They collected a subsample of 3,000 individuals from this pool, matching key demographic elements from the US census. The final sample left 1,338 valid cases in W1, yielding a cooperation rate of 45.5%, and 511 valid cases in W2, yielding a cooperation rate of 40.9%. We found that there might be some systematic differences between Wave 1 to Wave 2 for the strengthening of the relationship among key variables (see Table 3in the Supplementary File). However, given the case differences in W1 and W2, our findings over time are more critical since the sample attrition makes it harder to capture participation behaviors.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Criterion Variable

The dependent variable illegal protest participation measures engagement with illegal protest. Adapted from Gil de Zúñiga and Goyanes (2021), participants were asked how frequently (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) they have participated in the following activities: (a) Participating in political rallies or protests that break the law; (b) seizing buildings such as factories, government buildings, university offices, etc.; (c) participating in a confrontation with police or other governmental authorities.; and (e) being part of political activities that may result in public or private property damage (e.g., breaking windows, vehicles, street signs, etc.; W1 Cronbach's α = .98; M = 2.30; SD = 2.35; W2 Cronbach's α = .98; M = 1.90; SD = 2.03). Since our criterion variable "illegal protest participation" was skewed, which might lead to problems in model fit. Therefore, we have transformed our criterion variable by square rooting it (W1 M = 1.37; SD = .64; W2 M = 1.27; SD = .58) before including it in all of our regression models.

3.2.2. Independent Variables

Uncivil discussion measures the frequency individuals engage in uncivil online discussion with others based on a scale from Goyanes et al. (2021). Participants were asked how often (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) they talked about politics or public affairs *online* with the following people: (a) People who do NOT discuss politics in a civil manner, and (b) people who have insulted/intimidated/threatened you (W1 Spear-Brown ρ = .89; M = 2.53; SD = 2.40).

Ideological extremity measures the distance to the mean ideological position on both political and economic issues (Bartels, 2002; Huckfeldt et al., 2004), and it is constructed in two steps. First, we constructed a two-item index for which participants were asked to answer the following two questions: (a) On political issues, where would you place yourself on a scale of 0–10, where 10 = *strong conservative* and 0 = *strong liberal*?; and (b) on economic issues, where would you place yourself on a scale of 0–10, where 10 = *strong conservative* and 0 = *strong liberal*? (W1 Spearman-Brown ρ = .85; M = 6.44; SD = 2.80). In the beginning, the ideological position of each individual in the sample was calculated by averaging these two items. Next, we subtracted individuals' ideological position from the mean of the entire sample, which gave us the distance of the individuals' ideological position from the whole sample's ideological position. Then, ideological extremity was constructed by obtaining the absolute values of the distance of the ideological position (M = .80; SD = .60). In this case, the higher value indicated the higher ideological extremity.

3.2.3. Control Variables

Legal protest participation measures individuals' engagement with legal protest which will be controlled in this study. Based on measures from Gil de Zúñiga and Goyanes (2021), respondents were asked how frequently they did (1 = *not at all*; 10 = *a great deal*) (a) participate in permitted demonstrations and political rallies, (b) participate in peaceful protests, and (c) partake in legal protests for political reasons (W1 Cronbach's α = .96; M = 2.86; SD = 2.58).

Political interest taps into subjects' overall interest in politics and current affairs (Lupia & Philpot, 2005; Verba & Nie, 1987) by including the following two questions (1 = *not at all*; 10 = *a great deal*): (a) How interested are you in information about what is going on in politics and public affairs?; and (b) how closely do you pay attention to information about what's going on in politics and public affairs? The two items were combined into an index that yielded a robust reliability Spearman-Brown coefficient (W1 Spearman-Brown ρ = .90; M = 6.13; SD = 2.72).

Traditional media news use was measured by asking respondents to indicate how often (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) in the past month they did get news from the following media sources: (a) network TV news (e.g., ABC, CBS, NBC); (b) local television news (cf. local affiliate stations); (c) national newspapers (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*); (d) local newspapers (e.g., *The Oregonian*, *Houston Chronicle*, *The Miami Herald*); (e) MSNBC cable news; (f) CNN cable news; (g) FOX cable news; and (h) radio news (e.g., NPR, talk shows; 8 items, W1 Cronbach's α = .88; M = 4.50; SD = 1.91).

Social media news use was captured by multiple scales that were used to measure the frequency with which subjects use social media to consume news and public affairs information (Goyanes et al., 2021). Respondents were asked to indicate how often in the past month they got news from the following sources including "local news on social media," "national news on social media," "Facebook," "Twitter," "Snapchat," "LinkedIn," "WhatsApp" or "Instagram." Additionally, respondents were asked to think of the social media they use the most and how often they did use it to "stay informed about current events and public affairs," "stay informed about my local community," and "get news about current events from mainstream media (such as CNN or ABC)." All 11 items are measured on a 1–10 Likert type scale (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) and combined into an index after examining its construct reliability (W1 Cronbach's α = .91, M = 3.60, SD = 2.07).

Adapted from Eveland and Hively's (2009), offline political discussion measures the frequency individuals discuss politics with others offline. Participants were asked how often (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) they talked about politics or public affairs *offline* with the following people: spouse/partner, family, relatives; friends; neighbors, co-workers you know well; acquaintances;

strangers; neighbors, co-workers you don't know well; people who agree with you; people whose political views are similar to yours; people from a different race or ethnicity; people from a different social class (W1 Cronbach's α = .93, M = 3.85, SD = 2.07).

Online political discussion measures the frequency individuals discuss politics with others online (Eveland & Hively, 2009). Participants were asked how often (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) they talked about politics or public affairs *online* with the following people: spouse/partner, family, relatives; friends; neighbors, co-workers you know well; acquaintances; strangers; neighbors, co-workers you don't know well; people who agree with you; people whose political views are similar to yours; people from a different race or ethnicity; people from a different social class (W1 Cronbach's α = .96, M = 3.33, SD = 2.75).

Adapted from Goyanes et al. (2021), offline uncivil discussion measures the frequency individuals engage in uncivil discussion with others offline. Participants were asked how often (1 = *never* to 10 = *all the time*) they talked about politics or public affairs *offline* with the following people: (a) people who do NOT discuss politics in a civil manner, and (b) people who have insulted/intimidated/threatened you (W1 Spearman-Brown ρ = .87, M = 2.62, SD = 2.33).

The following demographic variables were also controlled in the present study (see Bachmann & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013): age (18–22 years: 7.1; 36–55: 39.7%; 23–35: 25.2%; 56 or older: 28%), education (less than high school: 3.6%; high school: 31.6%; some college: 25%; Master's degree: 15.5%; Bachelor's degree: 11.8%; some graduate education 6.7%; professional certificate: 4%; and Doctoral degree: 1.9%), ethnicity or race (75.2% majority: white), and income (annual household income where 1 = *0 to 14,999* and 7 = *2000,000 or more*; M = 3.6, SD = 1.47).

3.3. Data Analysis

First, we ran a bivariate zero-order correlation to showcase the association between all the variables of interest (see Table 1). Second, cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive regression models were executed to test the relationship between ideological extremity, offline/online uncivil discussion, and illegal protest. Third, PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2017) was used to test whether online uncivil discussion mediated the relationship between online political discussion and illegal protest.

4. Results

H1 proposed that ideological extremity would be positively related to illegal protest participation. Surprisingly, the cross-sectional regression model showed that ideological extremity was negatively associated with illegal protest (β = −.042, p < .01). This means that the higher ideological extremity led to lower engagement with illegal protest. The lagged regression model illustrated that ideological extremity was not significantly associated with illegal protest (β = .013, p > .05) and so did the autoregressive model (β = .053, p > .05; see Table 2). As a result, we reject H1.

H2 proposed that online uncivil discussion would be positively related to illegal protest participation when controlling for other forms of political discussion. Our cross-sectional (β = .206, p < .001), lagged (β = .260, p < .001) regression model showed that online uncivil discussion was the only form of political discussion that remains significantly and positively associated with illegal protest over time. However, online uncivil discussion was marginally positively related to illegal protest participation in the autoregressive regression model (β = .120, p = .07).

RQ1 asked whether there was any indirect effect between online discussion and illegal protest participation. A possible mediating role of online uncivil discussion among online political discussion and illegal protest was tested through PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2017). As depicted in Figure 1, the indirect effect of online discussion on illegal protest engagement through online uncivil discussion was significant in the cross-sectional model (β = .020, p < .001, 95% CI = [.012, .029]). More specifically, online political discussion was positively related to online uncivil discussion significantly (β = .369, p < .001) and which in turn was positively associated with illegal protest engagement (β = .055, p < .001). Interestingly, the direct effect of online political discussion was significantly and negatively associated with illegal protest engagement (β = −.021, p < .01).

However, when these same effects were analyzed over time, both direct effects of online discussion on illegal protest disappeared (p > .05) in lagged an autoregressive analysis, while the indirect effect of online discussion through online uncivil discussion also turned non-significant (β = .013, p > .05, 95% CI = [−.004, .031] in the autoregressive model). The only relationship that remained significant across all models was the positive and direct association over time between online uncivil discussion and illegal protest engagement.

5. Conclusions

While deliberative theory would suggest that ideological extremity and uncivil discussion have pernicious effects on democracy (Benhabib, 2021), some researchers found that under certain contexts, both phenomena could also have beneficial effects in terms of political engagement (Brooks & Geer, 2007; van der Meer et al., 2009). However, all political behaviors might not equally contribute to the sustainment of democracy (Chadha et al., 2012), and this is why this paper explored how both phenomena—ideological extremity and uncivil discussion—impact uncivil and unlawful political behavior, such as illegal protest.

Table 1. Zero-order correlations of key variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Age	1															
2. Gender (female)	.142**	1														
3. Education	.199**	−.077**	1													
4. Income	.158**	.119**	.481**	1												
5. Race (white)	.332**	−.128**	.094**	.159**	1											
6. Traditional news use [W1]	−.003	−.076**	.096**	.121**	−.120**	1										
7. Social media news use [W1]	−.409**	−.185**	−.05	−.060*	−.227**	.566**	1									
8. Legal protest [W1]	−.288**	−.162**	−.012	−.082**	−.228**	.420**	.528**	1								
9. Political interest [W1]	.223**	−.035	.247**	.231**	.055	.423**	.088**	.117**	1							
10. Ideological extremity [W1]	.052	−.149**	.026	.024	.022	.01	−0.02	0.037	.211**	1						
11. Offline discussion [W1]	−.070*	−.162**	.134**	.129**	−.107**	.409**	.353**	.373**	.463**	.205**	1					
12. Online discussion [W1]	−.252**	−.223**	.000	−.043	−.195**	.389**	.531**	.507**	.292**	.128**	.673**	1				
13. Offline uncivil discussion [W1]	−.287**	−.192**	−.04	−.063*	−.177**	.412**	.529**	.557**	.143**	0.014	.534**	.595**	1			
14. Online uncivil discussion [W1]	−.324**	−.211**	−.028	−.062*	−.193**	.387**	.547**	.576**	.129**	0.043	.481**	.730**	.795**	1		
15. Illegal protest participation [W1]	−.346**	−.212**	−.062*	−.088**	−.229**	.394**	.587**	.787**	0.03	−0.059*	.274**	.449**	.593**	.623**	1	
16. Illegal protest participation [W2]	−.308**	−.132**	.042	−.053	−.221**	.318**	.545**	.489**	0.040	−0.038	.130**	.315**	.417**	.499**	.629**	1

Notes: Sample size = 1,337 (W1); 511 (W2); cell entries are two-tailed zero-order correlation coefficients; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; Pearson coefficients based on bootstrapping to 5,000 samples with confidence intervals set at 95%.

Table 2. Cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive regression models testing uncivil discussion (offline & online) and illegal protest.

	Illegal protest participation ^{W1} (crossectional)	Illegal protest participation ^{W2} (lagged)	Illegal protest participation ^{W2} (autoregressive)
Block 1: Autoregressive term			
Illegal protest participation ^{W1}	—	—	.478***
ΔR^2	—	—	45.5%
Block 2: Demographics			
Age	−.016	−.078	−.074
Gender (female)	−.061**	−.114**	−.093*
Education	−.014	.126**	.102*
Income	.006	−.100*	−.089*
Race (white)	.013	−.032	−.009
ΔR^2	13.8%	14.6%	3.2%
Block 3: News use			
Traditional news use ^{W1}	.037	−.043	−.045
Social media news use ^{W1}	.182***	.304***	.222***
ΔR^2	25.5%	18.6%	3.1%
Block 4: Political attitudes			
Legal protest ^{W1}	.571***	.274***	.022
Political interest ^{W1}	−.087***	−.063	−.035
Ideological extremity ^{W1}	−.042*	.013	.053
ΔR^2	27.6%	8.2%	0.3%
Block 5: Discussion			
Offline discussion ^{W1}	−.061*	−.077	−.053
Online discussion ^{W1}	−.091**	−.074	−.012
Offline uncivil discussion ^{W1}	.082**	.037	−.006
Online uncivil discussion ^{W1}	.206***	.260***	.120 (p = .07)
ΔR^2	3.0%	4.0%	.7%
Total R^2	69.9%	45.3%	52.9%

Notes: Sample size = 1,337 (W1), 511 (W2); cell entries are final-entry standardized Beta (β) coefficients; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

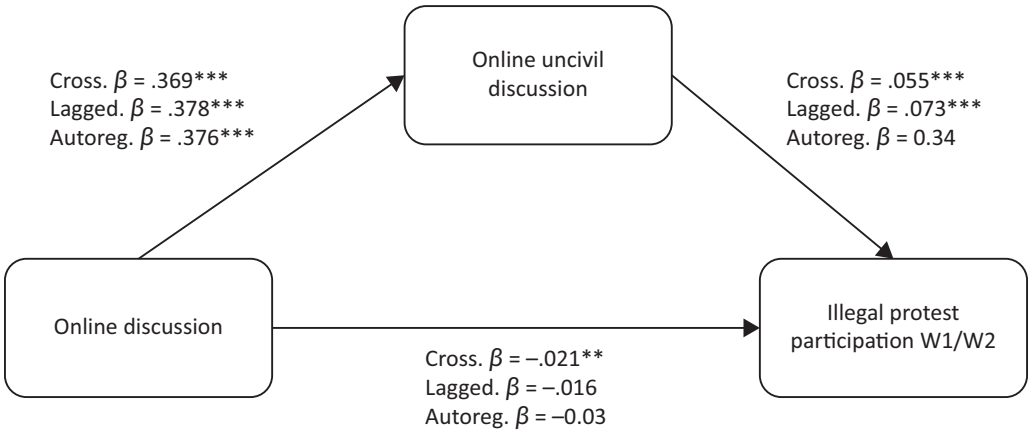

Figure 1. Cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive effects of online political discussion on illegal protest, mediated through online uncivil discussion. Notes: Sample size = 1,337 (W1), 511 (W2); path entries are standardized Beta coefficients; the variables in Table 2 were included as control variables in the model; bootstrap samples for CI—5,000 simulations; the model includes the same controls and predictors as the models in Table 2; the point estimates of the indirect effects are Cross-sectional—β = .020, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [.012, .029]; Lagged—β = .028, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [.009, .047]; Autoregressive—β = .013, $p > .05$, 95% CI = [−.004, .031].

We found that online incivility in political discussion is positively associated with unlawful protest across different models while ideological extremity and other forms of political discussion become less relevant. However, the significance of the role of online incivility in autoregressive model is marginally significant ($p < .10$) compared to cross-sectional model ($p < .001$) and lagged model ($p < .001$). Our findings contribute to the literature pointing at the pernicious effects of exposure to uncivil political discussion (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Hwang et al., 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). More specifically, these results build upon previous studies which found that exposure to incivility fosters uncivil reactions (Barnidge, 2017; Masullo Chen & Lu, 2017).

While the previous studies mostly analyzed uncivil reactions in the digital sphere, this study goes further and shows how incivility online can also foster incivility on the streets. Our research confirms recent studies exploring whether exposure to incivility online could lead to uncivil behavior offline (Müller & Schwarz, 2021). In that sense, more research is needed to search for more uncivil political behaviors offline as a result of past experiences of online incivility. Interestingly, we also found that uncivil offline discussion does not impact illegal protest engagement over time, suggesting there are specific features in online discussions that fuel uncivil behavior (Barnidge, 2017; Eveland et al., 2011).

Another interesting finding is that once controlling for legal protest engagement and uncivil discussion, ideological extremity does not have an impact on illegal protest over time. These results refute prior research suggesting violent and high-risk activism was primarily encouraged by radicalization (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012; Della Porta, 2018; DiGrazia, 2014). In that sense, further studies exploring how uncivil discussion could be moderating the effects of ideological extremity on illegal protest are certainly welcomed.

We also explored the mediating role of online uncivil discussion on the relationship between online discussion and illegal protest and found it is significant for the cross-sectional and lagged model, but not for the autoregressive one. These findings suggest the need for better-quality panel data to confirm or reject these preliminary findings over time. Until then, this study reveals with distinct concurrent tests that higher exposure to online incivility is positively associated with a higher probability of illegal protest engagement, thus offering support for research suggesting that incivility online can lead to incivility offline (Müller & Schwarz, 2021; Wahlström et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2020). Moreover, in an age of increasing uncivil discourse (Dodd & Schraufnagel, 2013) and normalization of uncivil disobedience (Delmas, 2018), more research is needed to better understand the consequences of uncivil and illegal protest both on activists and the political system (Davenport et al., 2019; Vestergren et al., 2017).

Albeit important, these findings do not come with trivial limitations. First, self-reported frequency of illegal protest behavior may reflect an under or overestimation of protest behavior. However, online surveys have been found to be a reliable tool to measure illegal behaviors that are susceptible to desirability bias (Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010; Persson & Solevid, 2014). Also, recent research using the same instrument for the measurement of legal and illegal protest has clarified how social media affects the likelihood of engaging in illegal protest behavior (Gil de Zúñiga & Goyanes, 2021). Second, our data were collected in the US before recent waves of disruptive protests, such as Black Lives Matter or the Capitol Riot. We should take our results with caution before generalizing them to other country settings. In that regard, further studies in different environments are certainly needed. Despite these limitations, our study is among the first to examine the relationship between uncivil online discussion and illegal protest engagement. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of the role of incivility, especially online incivility, spurring offline negative consequences to democracy. Particularly, it showcases that uncivil online discussion is more powerful in activating illegal political behaviors compared to other forms of discussion or ideological extremity.

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Conflict of Interests

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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