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The Role of Media Use in Political Mobilization: A Comparison of Free and Restrictive Countries

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Studies examining the link between media use and political mobilization focus on contexts with high levels of democracy and freedom. This mixed-methods study investigates whether intentions for collective action are predicted by media use and past political participation offline and online in countries categorized as *free* versus *restrictive*. Quantitative analyses show that intensive users of offline media were more inclined toward future political

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participation if they were citizens of a *free* country and if they reported high levels of group efficacy. Although online media use also predicted future political participation, this likelihood was higher among citizens of *restrictive* countries who reported lower levels of group efficacy. Qualitative analyses provide a deeper understanding of the contextual differences between free and restrictive countries.

Keywords: media use, online political participation, offline political participation, digital media, social media, collective action, group efficacy, free countries, restrictive countries

As exemplified by recent social upheavals like Fridays for Future and Black Lives Matter, we see a significant shift from institutional political activities, such as voting, to more noninstitutional, elite-challenging political activities, such as demonstrating and protesting (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), with growing participation in collective action and alternative forms of political engagement around the world (Young, Selander, & Vaast, 2019). The media landscape has contributed profoundly to the diversification of political activities (Christensen, 2011; Dalton, 2008), opening new possibilities for political engagement. The relationship between digital media use and political participation is gradually increasing worldwide (Boulianne, 2020), notably in countries where political rights and civil liberties are restricted (Anderson, 2020). In nondemocratic countries, "Internet use is positively and significantly related to protest participation" (Anderson, 2020, p. 11). However, the extent to which the role of media use in collective action is universal (or different) across countries, representing different structural and political conditions, remains unclear.

The present study examines the link between media use and previous political participation (as independent variables) and the intention for collective action (as dependent variable) in two political contexts—*free* and *restrictive* countries—a categorization based on the Global Freedom Score reported by Freedom House.

Recent studies show that perceived group efficacy, that is, the perception that one's group can effectively change existing injustice, differentiates political participation in free and restrictive contexts (Ayanian et al., 2021). Contexts characterized by a high degree of electoral freedom, media independence, and functioning civil liberties are likely to provide citizens with higher levels of perceived efficacy. Contexts characterized by deficiencies in these liberties are likely to limit citizens' perceived efficacy. We further explore the influence of political context on the relationship between media use and political mobilization through perceived efficacy. By employing an online survey and a mixed-methods strategy, we first test our assumption that perceived group efficacy moderates the link between (1) media use, (2) past political participation, and (3) collective action intentions in *free* countries, but less so in *restrictive* contexts. We then contextualize and broaden our quantitative results by analyzing the participants' qualitative responses about their media use and political engagement motivations, opinions, and feelings. Overall, our study has a strong theory-building, exploratory aim.

(Digital) Media Use and Political Participation

Citizens' political participation plays an essential role in strengthening civil society and democracy (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011). Political participation refers to any behavior that aims to influence political processes and decisions (Dalton, 2008). Media use significantly contributes to such engagement. Studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between traditional mass media use and political participation. For instance,

getting news from radio, television, and print media has been shown to correlate with higher tendencies to engage in conventional forms of political activities, particularly voting (Gastil & Xenos, 2010; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001), as well as elite-challenging political activities, such as protesting (Corrigall-Brown & Wilkes, 2014).

Furthermore, consumption of and exposure to political news and information in broadsheets and television have been linked to individuals' enhanced awareness, knowledge, and interest in sociopolitical issues (Aarts & Semetko, 2003), which can lead to civic and political mobilization (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Although not necessarily narrowing "knowledge gaps," traditional mass media reach a wide audience and therefore "change the distribution of political knowledge" (Jenssen, 2013). Thus, mass media consumption becomes a source of diverse viewpoints and encourages political exchange and opportunities for civic involvement (Mutz & Martin, 2001). However, recent studies show that such traditional mass media effects seem to be in decline (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009; Prior, 2007), especially among adolescents (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2011)—a development that seems to coincide with the rise of the Internet.

Researchers have increasingly studied the effects of digital media use on political participation and collective action. "Digital media," "new media," and "Internet and social media" are being used to describe and encompass "the interactive activities and environments that people engage in online… such as computers, smartphones, and tablets, and to services such as email, texting, Skype, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, blogs, forums, and so on" (Lindgren, 2017, p. 16). With the growing usage and variety of such digital platforms, new and hybrid forms of political activity have developed, such as online petitioning, blogging, and voting via an online service (Bimber, Cunill, Copeland, & Gibson, 2015; Christensen, 2011). Research further illustrates that digital media has a more positive effect on both conventional and alternative forms of political participation than traditional mass media (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, & Bimber, 2020; Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009). This applies especially to the "Internet generation" (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011), that is, individuals who tend to exhibit little political engagement (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

Recent meta-analyses have shown that the effects of digital media on political participation vary depending on the purposes of use (gathering information or news, networking or relation building, and expressing political opinions) and the political context, particularly in terms of the existence of a free press (Boulianne, 2015, 2019; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016). Contexts that allow a free, independent press constitute democratic—or *free*—systems, while nondemocratic—or *restrictive*—contexts, such as authoritarian regimes or countries with state-controlled media, partially or fully inhibit freedom of the press (Boulianne, 2019, 2020; see also Freedom House, 2020b).

Boulianne's (2019, 2020) findings show that using digital media for *political information* is *more significant* for offline political participation in *nondemocratic* contexts than in democratic systems—a finding that affirms digital media's affordance as an alternative avenue for political news dissemination in contexts without a free press. However, using digital media to *express political views* is *less significant* for offline political participation in *nondemocratic* political systems—probably because of people's "reluctance to move online forms of political expression into 'real-world political action'" (Boulianne, 2019, p. 50).

The present study adds to this latest strand of research. It extends Boulianne's (2020) line of inquiry by explaining and exploring the link between (1) traditional mass media use (*offline media use*) and digital media use (*online media use*), (2) traditional political participation (*offline political participation*) and

newer forms of political participation (*online political participation*), and (3) intentions for collective action in free and restrictive countries.

Perceived Efficacy—A Driver of Collective Action

The conditions that give rise to collective action confronting social injustice have constituted a vibrant line of scholarship, especially in political psychology. This scholarship has examined the micro-level social-psychological factors that determine individuals' motivations to participate in collective action and has identified an array of such drivers (see van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & van Dijk, 2011, for review). In a meta-analysis of this work, van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears (2008) put forward an integrative model, the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA), which distinguishes between three collective action motivations: Individuals are likely to act for a collective cause if they (1) perceive injustice in their environment (perceived injustice), (2) identify with a group that represents change (social identity), and (3) perceive this group to be effective in reaching change (perceived efficacy). Research has not only confirmed the relevance of these three drivers for collective action (Setiawan, Scheepers, & Sterkens, 2019; Thomas, Zubielevitch, Sibley, & Osborne, 2020; van Zomeren, 2019; van Zomeren et al., 2008) but also underlined the role of Internet media in this context (Alberici & Milesi, 2016; Hsiao & Yang, 2018; Jost et al., 2018; Odağ, Uluğ, & Solak, 2016; Uluğ, Odağ, & Solak, 2020; see Hsiao, 2018, for review).

Scholars now agree that Internet-based media, particularly social media, serve as central tools supporting the social psychology of collective action. Social media can quickly spread information (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012), reach numerous like-minded individuals (Hsiao, 2018; Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011; see the term "connective action" in Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), and circumvent government censorship, especially in repressive contexts (Odağ et al., 2016; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). These affordances seem to facilitate the expression of perceived injustice and contribute to the development of social identities and perceived efficacy. However, most research is limited to democratic contexts, where collective mobilization is "relatively risk-free and unlikely to be met with severe repression" (Ayanian et al., 2021, p. 5). Currently, little is known about the social-psychological mechanisms of collective action in less democratic, more repressive contexts. To close this gap, the present study investigates the role political context plays in media-enabled political engagement by considering the social-psychological drivers that are likely to impact this relationship. Specifically, we investigate how the perceived efficacy individuals ascribe to the group they identify with plays a role in shaping collective action intentions.

The Impact of Political Context on Perceived Efficacy and Collective Action

Social-psychological drivers of collective action are context-dependent (van Zomeren, 2019). Cohen-Chen and van Zomeren (2018), for example, showed that in intractable conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, perceived efficacy nullifies collective action attempts. Tausch et al. (2011) demonstrated that in some conflicts, perceived efficacy is unrelated or even negatively associated with motivations to engage in collective action. Further studies have found that in repressive contexts, perceived efficacy is an important factor shaping collective mobilization (Ayanian & Tausch, 2016; Ayanian et al., 2021). However, in repressive contexts, such as Egypt, Hong Kong, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine, collective mobilization does not rely on efficacy, as typically defined in democratic contexts. A different type of efficacy turns out to be much more important here: *identity consolidation* efficacy, associated with building a strong movement and standing up in solidarity for those in

need. In repressive contexts, the link between perceived efficacy, as defined above (in terms of reaching political change), and collective action is not as clear-cut as it is in democratic societies. Ayanian et al. (2021) note that the perceived risks of collective mobilization are larger in repressive contexts; that is, individuals have a higher likelihood of being arrested, injured, or otherwise sanctioned by the government. Therefore, such contexts are likely to produce low degrees of perceived efficacy, and individuals engage in collective action with little hope of achieving sociopolitical change. Nevertheless, major social movements like the Egyptian uprising (Abdulla, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), the Arab Spring (McGarty, Thomas, Lala, Smith, & Bliuc, 2014), the Gezi Park protests, and other demonstrations in Turkey (Odağ et al., 2016; Uluğ et al., 2020) arose in those environments. We argue here that in such contexts, the role of digital media is more pronounced, as it contributes to mobilization efforts despite perceived risks by moving collective action to safer spaces on the Internet.

As such, we assume that traditional mass media (offline media) plays a more important role than digital media (online media) in free contexts than in restrictive contexts, while the role of online media should be reversed because they offer an alternative space for participation in restrictive environments. Previous research suggests that perceived group efficacy plays a relevant role in this relationship, as it is often found to be higher in free countries and lower in restrictive countries. Therefore, we assume that higher levels of group efficacy are associated with future political engagement among citizens from free countries but not among those from restrictive contexts. Therefore, lower levels of group efficacy should have a positive impact on the relationship between Internet media use, past political participation, and collective action intentions. These assumptions represent the driving hypotheses of our study. However, since we are among the first to test these relationships, our study is as exploratory as it is hypothesis-driven. To emphasize this concurrence, we refrain from using the label *hypotheses* in the following and prefer the term *assumptions*.

Mixed-Methods Design

Sample

Between October 2018 and November 2019, 310 participants engaged in an online survey covering a broad range of topics, including (digital) media use, engagement, and identification with political issues, as well as social-psychological drivers of collective action. Additionally, open-ended questions allowed the participants to express their opinions, motivations, and feelings freely. The survey was created using Qualtrics software. To compare individuals from free and restrictive countries, data from both contexts had to be collected. Obtaining such data is challenging, so we chose a triple recruitment strategy: Broadly published social media ads (e.g., on Facebook and Twitter) (1) were coupled with email distribution among relevant gatekeepers in our scientific network (2), and convenience and snowball sampling strategies (3).

The categorization of *free versus restrictive countries* is based on the *Freedom in the World* Report in 2018 and 2019 (Freedom House, 2020a). Based on 25 indicators assessing political rights and civil liberties in the previous calendar year, the index indicates whether a country or territory is free (100–71 points), partly free (70–35 points), or not free (34–4 points; Freedom House, 2020b). We divided the sample into two groups: Individuals who indicated citizenship of a free country were assigned to the group of *free* countries, and those whose countries were rated as either partly free or not free to the group of *restrictive* countries. Since not all individuals indicated their citizenship, the sample size was reduced to N = 153

participants, of which 58% (89 individuals) were female. The mean age was 29.66 years (*SD* = 12.30). As Table 1 shows, the participants came from 25 countries, 63% of whom indicated citizenship in a free country.

Table 1. Distinction Between Citizenships of Free and Restrictive Countries.

Citizenship	**Sample Size**	**Citizenship**	**Sample Size**
Restrictive	***N***	**Free**	***n***
Albania	2	Australia	1
Azerbaijan	3	Austria	1
Bahrain	1	Belize	1
Bolivia	1	Brazil	1
Cameroon	2	Bulgaria	4
China	4	Croatia	1
El Salvador	1	Denmark	1
Ethiopia	1	Finland	1
Indonesia	1	France	2
Kazakhstan	1	Germany	40
Kenya	14	Ghana	1
Lebanon	1	India	3
Libya	1	Italy	1
Malaysia	1	Romania	2
Mexico	1	South Korea	1
Morocco	1	Sweden	1
Nepal	2	Switzerland	1
Philippines	2	UK	2
Russia	5	USA	32
Singapore	1		
Thailand	1		
Togo	1		
Turkey	2		
Uganda	1		
Ukraine	1		
Venezuela	1		
Yemen	3		
	56		97

We chose a heterogeneous sampling approach (Boehnke, Lietz, Schreier, & Wilhelm, 2011), which grouped individuals from contexts with varying degrees of freedom/restriction because we found similarities *among* those countries and differences *between* the two groups. The advantage of this strategy for culturally comparative research like ours is that high levels of heterogeneity in the sample increase its representativeness about the variable of interest (free versus restrictive), broadening the variety of observed cases (meaning that we could reach individuals from a large variety of similar contexts). This allows us to draw fine-grained conclusions about the impact of context on the link between media use, political participation, perceived efficacy, and collective action. In other words, our aim is a theoretical generalization, not a generalization to a population. In addition, the heterogeneity of our sample constitutes an ideal basis on which to draw such analytical inferences. If we find a clear pattern of relationships between study variables despite the heterogeneity of our sample, this will increase the validity of our theory (Boehnke et al., 2011)—again, not to generalize to a population but to build theory.

Variables

Offline and Online Media Use

Our first predictor was measured using items from the General Social Survey (GSS; Smith, Davern, Freese, & Morgan, 2017). On a scale of 1 (*daily*) to 6 (*never*), participants indicated how often they received news or information on political issues in the past 12 months from four offline media (radio, television, newspaper, magazines/other printed media) and four online media (news websites or apps, YouTube, online community forums, social media posts). Principal component analysis with varimax rotation of all eight items indicated a two-factor solution measuring offline media consumption ($\alpha = 0.72$) and online media consumption ($\alpha = 0.62$). The four corresponding items were then summarized to one score for offline ($M = 0.04$, $SD = 1.00$) and one score for online media consumption ($M = -0.05$, $SD = 0.98$), with lower scores indicating higher levels.

Past Political Participation

Our second predictor was also measured using items from the GSS (Smith et al., 2017). On a scale of 1 ("daily") to 6 ("never"), participants indicated how often they carried out four different political activities offline or online in the past 12 months, namely discussing political issues in a public space, signing petitions, being part of a demonstration or protest group, and actively distributing political information. Principal component analysis of eight items indicated a two-factor solution, with a clear distinction between online and offline participation and one exception. Signing a petition, both online and offline, loaded on the offline factor. This is not surprising for two reasons. First, whether online or offline, signing a petition requires the same action from an individual, namely providing a signature; second, digital versions of petitions have become common since the late 1990s. Therefore, both petition items were excluded from the analysis. A second principal component analysis of the remaining six items produced a two-factor solution, one measuring offline political participation ($\alpha = 0.85$) and the other measuring online political participation ($\alpha = 0.72$). Finally, the three items loading on each factor were summarized into a one-factor score for past offline ($M = -0.03$, $SD = 0.95$) and one score for past online political participation ($M = -0.11$, $SD = 0.98$), with lower scores indicating higher levels.

Collective Action Intention

The dependent variable in our quantitative analysis was measured by asking the participants a single question: "Looking back at the outcomes of your last political involvement, would you do it again?" Response options ranged from 1 ("definitely") to 4 ("no, not at all") (M = 2.02, SD = 1.14), so lower scores indicated greater levels of agreement. The format of the question was gleaned from van Zomeren, Leach, and Spears (2010).

Group Efficacy Measure

Our first moderator was adopted from van Zomeren et al. (2010). Participants were asked to what extent they believed their group could make a change. Answers were given on a scale of 1 ("to a very large extent") to 4 ("to a tiny extent") (M = 2.59, SD = 0.10).

Freedom

The second moderator divided the sample into participants who were citizens of a free country (71 points or more on the scale provided by Freedom House, 2020b) and participants who were of a restrictive country (70 points or fewer).

Qualitative Material

This article also analyzes the responses of participants to open-ended questions to provide them with the opportunity to reflect on their media experiences and political involvement. The participants were asked which particular (digital) media platforms they used for their political engagement and what the latest collective action they engaged in was. Furthermore, we wanted to know what kind of action this was, whether it was done offline or online, what motivated them to become active, which role they played, and what they expected from this involvement, personally and for the group they identified with. Finally, the participants elaborated on whether they, personally or as a group, could make a change with the collective action they described.

Mixed-Methods Analysis Strategy

We are interested in the extent to which intentions for collective action are impacted by different media use and past political action (offline versus online) in different political contexts. Specifically, we explored the differences between free and restrictive countries according to the latest Global Freedom Score (Freedom House, 2020b). We assume that perceived efficacy moderates this relationship at the micro-level. The final goal of this article is to understand how underlying motivations for media-enabled political behavior differ depending on the context. Hence, we applied a mixed-methods analysis strategy.

To test our assumptions, we chose a moderated moderation analysis and used the macro application PROCESS implemented in SPSS created by Preacher and Hayes (Hayes, 2018). To avoid potentially problematic multicollinearity with interaction terms, the included variables were centered,

and interaction terms were created (Aiken & West, 1991). Models 1 and 2 investigated the link between offline or online media use and the intention for collective action, and Models 3 and 4 investigated previous offline or online political action offline and collective action intentions. In all four analyses, perceived group efficacy functioned as a moderator. However, we assume that the origin of the study participants moderates group efficacy. Therefore, citizenship in a free or restrictive country was modeled to moderate the first moderator.

Afterward, we conducted a textual analysis of the participants' qualitative responses. The qualitative analysis not only contextualizes our quantitative findings but also enables a deeper understanding of the differences between citizens from free and restrictive countries, particularly how participants themselves make sense of their political activities (McKee, 2003). Our process was informed by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory approach, which involves a constant comparative method in which a researcher identifies key themes or categories in a text. It is an iterative process in which a researcher reads and rereads the text, creates notes and memos, and continually compares their findings to understand meanings.

Quantitative Results

Media Use Offline and Online

Model 1 tested whether offline media used to receive news or information on political issues through television, radio, newspapers, and magazines predicts the intention of collective action. The model explained 33.1% of the variance (R^2 = .331, $F(7, 145) = 10.24$, $p < .001$). The analysis revealed a significant main effect for free versus restrictive countries ($B = -.42$, $t = -2.47$, $p < .05$, [LLCI[2] = −.7, ULCI = −.083]). The use of offline media for receiving news or information on political issues was moderated by context: Participants from free countries (Freedom House, 2020b) who were heavy users of offline media, and who reported high levels of group efficacy, were more inclined to engage in future collective action compared with individuals from restrictive countries whose level of offline media use had no such effect. Figure 1 illustrates moderated moderation.

[2] LLCI and ULCI refer to the confidence levels that were produced by the bootstrap procedure. LLCI stands for "lower level confidence interval" and ULCI for "upper level confidence interval." A confidence interval that does not include "0" speaks for a robust finding.

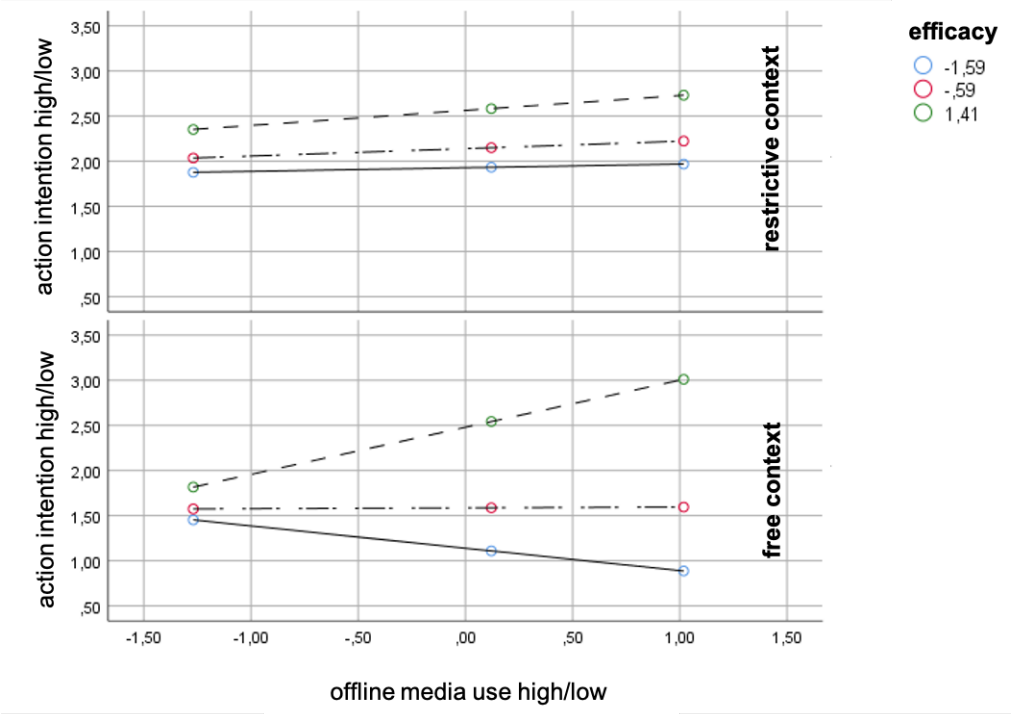

Figure 1. Interaction graph for Model 1.

Note. IV = offline media use, DV = action intention, moderator 1 = group efficacy, moderator 2 = free versus restrictive context; variables are centered, the continuous moderator "efficacy" is simple slopes displaying 16th percentile (blue), 50th percentile (red), and 84th percentile (green).

Next, Model 2 tested whether and how the use of online media—namely news websites or apps, YouTube, online community forums, and social media posts on political issues—impact the intention for collective action. Overall, it explained 30.3% of the variance (R^2 = .303, F(7, 145) = 9.02, p < .001). Two effects are worth reporting: a significant main effect for freedom (B = –.57, t = –3.18, p < .01, [LLCI = –.92, ULCI = –.21]) and a significant interaction of group efficacy and freedom (B = .40, t = 2.56, p < .05, [LLCI = .09, ULCI = .71]). The participants' context moderated the use of online media: Individuals from restrictive countries, who were heavy users of online media for political purposes with low levels of group efficacy, were more inclined to engage in future collective action than citizens of free countries. Here, the respondents' level of online media use had no effect. Figure 2 illustrates the results.

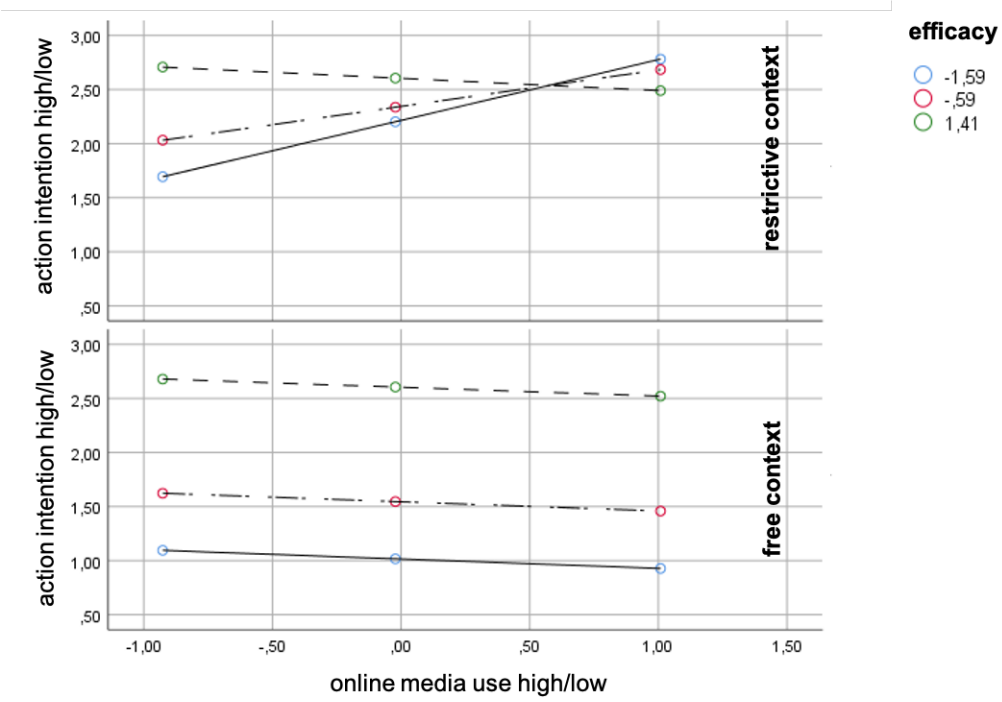

Figure 2. Interaction graph for Model 2.

Note. IV = online media use, DV = action tendencies, moderator 1 = group efficacy, moderator 2 = free versus restrictive context; variables are centered, the continuous moderator "efficacy" is simple slopes displaying 16th percentile (blue), 50th percentile (red), and 84th percentile (green).

Political Activities Offline and Online

Turning away from media use, Model 3 examined offline political activity, namely discussing political issues in a public space, being part of a demonstration or protest group, and actively distributing political information as a predictor[3] of collective action intentions. It explained 33.1% of the variance (R^2 = .33, F(7, 88) = 6.21, p < .001), but all tested relationships were insignificant. However, it is worth mentioning that the interaction between group efficacy and freedom was of marginal significance (B = .44, t = 1.72, p = .088, [LLCI = −.068, ULCI = .96]) and therefore pointed toward our expectation that context is relevant: Citizens of a free country tended to exhibit higher levels of perceived group efficacy and showed the strongest intention for collective action in the sample. This tendency was independent of past offline political activity.

Finally, Model 4 tested whether online political activity predicted intention for collective action. This moderated moderation model explained 30.1% of the variance (R^2 = .30, F(7, 88) = 5.41, p < .001). Again, all tested relationships were insignificant. A marginal significance of the interaction between group efficacy and freedom is nevertheless worth mentioning, pointing in the expected direction (B = .56, t = 1.90, p =

[3] Only the predictors changed, the moderators and outcome variable stayed the same.

.061, [LLCI = −.027, ULCI = 1.15]). In restrictive contexts, the intention for collective action did not differ depending on the level of group efficacy, nor did it matter whether participants engaged in political activity online. In contrast, citizens of free countries with higher levels of efficacy are more inclined to engage in future collective action.

Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis is structured around three topics. First, we examine how individuals from free and restrictive countries differ in their motivations for and expectations of participation in collective action offline. Then, we examine their experiences online before discussing the themes and patterns that our analysis identified as relevant for collective action, regardless of context.

Differences in Motivations for Participating in Collective Action Offline in Free and Restrictive Contexts

Citizens of free countries more frequently discussed experiences of attending physical protests and marches in their communities, ranging from anti-Nazi rallies in Germany to abortion rights marches in the United States. When asked what they thought they might get from their participation in such an activity, individuals suggested they were hoping to create solidarity around a particular issue and inform others about what was happening. For one individual, "Engaging with other humans to find peace in their own beliefs if it is done in a healthy manner" was an important outcome of their participation. "This brings me inner joy to watch people fighting for their own freedom." Another participant reported that "being louder and more present than the right winged parties" was one possible outcome that propelled their participation in anti-Nazi rallies. Although one individual said, "I expected to contribute by showing up and showing that citizens are involved"—the outcome, in this case, was less important than "showing up."

In restrictive contexts, respondents who attended physical marches or rallies often did so to oppose the government. One respondent said that they attended a "demonstration in Venezuela (online and offline) for the freedom of the country (current autocratic system)," while an individual in Guatemala reported attending an antigovernment protest there hoping to facilitate change. In Turkey, one individual said they attended the Gezi Park protests to fight for space and protest against the current government.

Many of the individuals who participated in physical protests, be they in Germany, Turkey, Venezuela, or the United States, seemed to do so because they wanted to leverage the power of group visibility for their cause. One participant shared this about their experience protesting white supremacy in the United States: "I hoped to see the far-right humiliated by being vastly outnumbered. I personally hoped not to get hurt. In both respects, the counter-protest to *Unite the Right 2* was a big success."

Motivations for Participating in Collective Action Online in Free and Restrictive Contexts

Participation in online political activity was often anchored around two goals: raising awareness and creating dialogue. Although one individual did question the utility of social media for political activity, saying, "By the way, talking about Twitter as 'political involvement' makes me feel ridiculous. It's pretty

lazy involvement." Such activity has been labeled "slacktivism" by some, as it does not seem to require much effort from a user to share a tweet or like a Facebook post (Christensen, 2011; Skoric, 2012). Lazy or not, social media was an important tool for collective action for the participants in this study.

Most respondents in this study reported using Facebook or Twitter to engage in collective action online, although there seemed to be a difference in how they engaged in activity in those spaces. The difference was summed up by one respondent, who noted that they used "mostly Facebook for interactions with friends/acquaintances; following some discourses on Twitter." Facebook seemed to be more for interacting with people they knew and Twitter for people they may not know personally. Other applications, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Weibo, were mentioned less frequently. Some individuals also mentioned using Discord, Reddit, and Tumblr to engage in political activity online—all three allow for anonymity, which Facebook or Twitter attempts to discourage.

The ubiquity of Facebook is interesting considering recent revelations about the scope of political (dis)information circulating on that site. The spread of such information has been found in connection to the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Madrigal, 2017), ethnic violence in Myanmar (Whitten-Woodring, Kleinberg, Thawnghmung, & Thitsar, 2020), and discourses about immigrants in Europe (Juhász & Szicherle, 2017). Peck (2020) has pointed out how the amplification of such material, as it is spread across social media networks and contextualized by users, can make it seem true, and Vaidhyanathan (2018) has argued that the spread of such disinformation works to undermine democratic processes. Despite these caveats, many participants in this study found Facebook a useful space to help them organize their collective action experiences. One individual reported, "Liking the Fridays for Future Berlin & Fridays for Future pages on Facebook, following what they were posting and then discussing the issue offline with friends."

For participants engaging in collective action in restrictive contexts, Facebook and other social media platforms provided an avenue for them to discuss their views without putting their physical bodies in danger. For instance, one individual felt compelled to use social media, as they "expressed my shock at the new law in Brunei to kill homosexual (sic) citizens." An individual in Hong Kong reported their participation in protests there this way: "I retweet the news on Facebook and live news while discussing with families and friends offline," suggesting that the in-person conversations were saved for contexts in which they felt safe. Another participant seemed to think that participating online by "raising awareness" could increase support for "the cause through strength in numbers" and help make it safer for people to physically show up for protests down the road. This sentiment was echoed by another individual who wrote, "I think awareness is the first prerequisite for change and I feel I could contribute to raising more awareness for topics I care about in help effect change."

Regardless of the Context: Motivations and Anticipated Outcomes of Collective Action Online and Offline

Overall, respondents reported engaging in various online and offline collective actions; perhaps, not surprisingly, much of that activity was tied to current events. For instance, one individual said they were spurred into collective action by school shootings in the United States, while several others reported taking part in activities related to Brexit in the United Kingdom, mining protests in Turkey, and corruption in Kenya.

Across the participants, whether they engaged in online or offline collective action, the feeling that an injustice was happening spurred their political engagement. One participant noted, "Standing in for your own rights gets harder every day." The injustices they said motivated them ranged from human rights issues broadly to government corruption, which they felt was hurting their cocitizens. One individual said that understanding "the power asymmetry of those calling the shots and those suffering the consequences" finally made them engage in collective action.

When asked what they hoped would be the outcome of their collective action, the responses ranged from a basic desire to get information out there to a desire to see real, profound political and social change. However, some suggested that they expected nothing to come of the action they had taken, saying that it "feels good to vent" and that they hoped that their "name may be logged as for or against a particular issue." It seemed to suggest that many felt that their visibility in advocating for a particular cause was important in their collective action engagement.

Discussion

Individuals engage in collective action in various contexts. This not only includes democratic contexts where freedom of speech is a fundamental right but also restrictive contexts where citizens stand up for a political or social cause and fight injustice and inequality, despite severe repression (for recent examples in Russia, Ukraine, Hong Kong, and Turkey, see Ayanian et al., 2021). Research has shown that several driving forces may facilitate collective mobilization in such contexts, such as media use, past political action, and perceived efficacy.

While there is abundant research on the impact of media use and past political participation on future political mobilization (Boulianne, 2019, 2020), most studies focus on democratic—or free—contexts (Ayanian et al., 2021). Whether the detected relationships and developed models apply to restrictive contexts remains unclear (van Zomeren, 2019). Furthermore, research examining mobilization mechanisms in repressive parts of the world shows that the underlying social-psychological mechanisms might differ, particularly concerning citizens' perceived efficacy beliefs (Ayanian et al., 2021; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

We considered these gaps in the literature and investigated whether the link between media use/past political action and future collective action differs depending on the political system in which individuals are embedded. We assumed that using traditional offline media for political purposes and activities is more likely to lead to future collective action in free countries than in restrictive countries. Similarly, online media use and political participation would more likely lead to future political engagement in restrictive contexts if online platforms offer alternative and safer spaces for participation. Furthermore, we assumed that these relationships are moderated by perceived group efficacy—while higher levels should be beneficial for collective action intentions in free contexts, in restrictive countries, lower levels of group efficacy should have this effect because the perceived risks of collective mobilization are larger. It should be noted that we were among the first to theorize about these relationships and test them systematically using a sophisticated mixed-methods approach. Therefore, our study explicitly combines theory-building and hypothesis-testing.

Our moderated moderation analyses confirmed our assumptions about media use—both political context and perceived efficacy mattered. First, offline media users were more inclined to engage in future political activities only if they were citizens of a free country and if they reported strong perceived group efficacy. No effects were found for individuals from restrictive countries. Second, as predicted, online media use was more relevant for citizens from restrictive contexts with low group efficacy. Only for them did online media use predict future collective action. These results demonstrate that the political context in which individuals live impacts their route to political mobilization. While television, radio, newspapers, and magazines still have the strongest activating potential in democratic societies, online media, such as news websites, online forums, and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, are more facilitatory in repressive contexts. This result supports case studies of mobilization, such as the Arab Spring (McGarty et al., 2014), the Egyptian Uprising (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), and the Gezi protests (Odağ et al., 2016). In these contexts, Internet media provides a sanctuary where oppositional opinions can be expressed despite existing government censorship (Akser & McCollum, 2019). Internet media produces a more personalized form of collective action in repressive contexts, in line with what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have referred to as connective action from loose networks of like-minded people organizing protests bottom-up. The power of the Internet in facilitating political and collective action has also been uncovered in the works of Boulianne (2019, 2020; Boulianne et al., 2020). Our study contributes an important source of variance to this research: the political context. The impact of Internet media use on political mobilization appears much stronger in restrictive contexts than in free ones—a finding that has been implied in several case studies but has hitherto not been tested systematically with a comparative design.

To our surprise, by comparing media use, past political actions—whether offline or online—did not predict future collective action, a finding that is relevant for multiple reasons. First, it illustrates how powerful media is as a tool for mobilization. Second, it shows that past political action is not a necessary precondition for collective mobilization. This may partly explain the enormous success of the Fridays for Future movement among young people, a group that is often described as politically apathetic (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011), pointing to a highly vital route to political engagement for youth.

Our qualitative analysis provided in-depth insights into the motivations for collective action. Across our participants, whether they were from a free or a restrictive country, making their opposition to an issue, policy, or politician *visible* was paramount—even when sharing views anonymously online. Their main aim was to ensure that others saw their oppositional views and that the hegemonic narrative of an issue was not the only one that circulated. One participant put it this way:

> We are one as we unite, so we are stronger as one. Spreading the word of injustice activates almost everyone and motivates them against a target that can be beaten. As people can't solve some problems by themselves they seem to keep that fire alive and transfer it to some other place.

Our qualitative findings thus support the three social-psychological drivers of collective action: perceived injustice, social identity, and perceived efficacy (in line with the SIMCA presented above). Previous studies have found support for these social-psychological, micro-level drivers of collective

action (Odağ et al., 2016; Setiawan et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2020; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Similarly, only a few studies have looked specifically at the contextual differences among these drivers. In one study, Ayanian et al. (2021) showed that general efficacy was less relevant in repressive contexts but that a specific subform of efficacy, identity consolidation efficacy, was much more important. The above quote illustrates this type of efficacy: Speaking in a united voice against injustice, creating solidarity around it, and creating a social movement despite the odds are in line with the goal of consolidating a collective voice and movement against existing injustice. This type of efficacy differs from how it is typically conceptualized in democratic contexts, namely, as a motivation toward actual political *change*. Our qualitative data thus produce a more nuanced understanding of the type of efficacy that seems to propel collective action forward. They also show that digital media is a good avenue for establishing identity consolidation efficacy. In this way, they complement our quantitative findings, which focus on general group efficacy perceptions.

Like most studies, the present research has limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small and heterogeneous and has the evident disadvantage of lacking generalizability. However, a major advantage rests in the theory-building potential: We can argue that the effects hold even with a heterogeneous sample, which points to a general underlying mechanism (Boehnke et al., 2011). The participants indicated citizenship from several countries, so the degree of freedom varied within each group. We also found significant differences between free and restrictive contexts, *despite* the heterogeneity of our sample, rendering our theoretical model plausible across them. To ensure that our theory can be generalized to larger and more homogenous restrictive versus free country samples, future research is needed.

Another limitation is that we used the self-reported citizenship of the participants to assign them to a free or restrictive country. This is problematic in cases where the place of residence is not identical to the country of citizenship, as it may impact the participant's media use and political activity. However, since in nondemocratic, repressive countries political activism can be dangerous, the first aim of the study was to protect the anonymity of the participants, which is why we refrained from asking overly personal questions. Future research should find more rigorous ways to identify in which political context and for which cause the participants are active, as this may influence participants' media use and political participation.

Overall, the present mixed-methods study is among the rare examples that study how media use and past political action impact the intention for collective action in (non-)repressive contexts around the world. Moreover, it compared free and restrictive contexts by analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. This strategy not only broadened but also deepened knowledge about both contexts and therefore contributed valuably to the literature. Our analyses demonstrate that the political system is crucial for the choices individuals make about collective engagement. Traditional media use can activate citizens of free, democratic countries, while individuals from restrictive contexts turn to online media for collective mobilization. As our qualitative analysis shows, the digital world is perceived as a safer place to raise opinions and work toward identity consolidation. We find notable differences between free and restrictive contexts and call for more comparative studies that investigate these further.

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