

The Process of Online Keyword Activism in Political Figure's Crisis: Moderating Roles of Like-Minded Public Opinion and Government Controllability of Crisis Outcomes

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Abstract

Using a national online survey in South Korea, this study examines the underlying psychological mechanisms of online keyword activism in supporting a politician. Findings show that when perceived like-minded opinion is extremely negative toward the politician, the like-minded opinion perception mitigates the effects of perceived majority opinion on crisis blame attribution and pro-politician activism. Government controllability intensifies the effects crisis blame has on pro-politician activism when it is extremely low. What drives more pro-politician activism is their perception of like-minded opinion through blaming external parties; what makes people refrain from pro-politician activism is their perception of low government controllability through blaming the politician.

Keywords

online activism, like-minded public opinion, public opinion climate, political crisis, government controllability

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In recent years, there has been a rise in hashtag activism or online keyword activism on social media platforms (Queen, 2019). Online keyword activism¹ refers to large quantities of social media postings appearing under common keywords which make certain claims (Yang, 2016). In contrast to traditional forms of activism (e.g., street protests), online activism represents for its participants a kind of low-effort, low-cost, and low-risk activity (Karpf, 2010; Minocher, 2019) and is not constrained by geographic boundaries (Bunting & Stamatel, 2019). Through searching or publishing postings with common keywords, users can easily engage in online keyword activism, making contributions to collective accumulations of a political or social claim (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015). Literature reveals that in democratic societies, around two thirds of online keyword activism falls into the political domain and nearly a third of online keyword activism specifically targets politicians, resulting in political figures' crises (Kim et al., 2021), which refers to a politician that has been involved in accusations of unethical behaviors or illegal behaviors (Huang, 2006).

When it comes to studying a political figure's crisis, most extant studies explore online activism in terms of it being aligned against the politician (e.g., Minocher, 2019; Rosenston & Hansen, 2003; Vaccari et al., 2015). In reality, however, some political figures' crises spur large-scale activism that is aligned with the politician, such as a recent Korean political crisis over South Korea's former Justice Minister, Cho Kuk (see the Context of Study in the following section for more details). This study labels the online keyword activism that supports the accused party as pro-politician activism and attempts to unpack why people participate in pro-politician activism. Previous research has investigated online activism in terms of its forms and impacts on media attention or offline participation (e.g., Choi & Park, 2014; Vaccari et al., 2015). Nevertheless, it has been relatively limited to understanding the descriptive characteristics of this new form of activism such as identifying who drives digital movements or how those movements spread, mostly relying on the content, semantic network, or thematic analysis methods (Xiong et al., 2019; Yang, 2016). The underlying psychological mechanisms of online activism, particularly in support of a crisis-involved party (i.e., pro-politician activism), have been barely explored.

Past literature has documented that crisis blame attribution, which refers to the degree to which people attribute crisis blame to a party (Coombs & Halladay, 1996), serves as a fundamental psychological need of human beings and a motivator for subsequent crisis responses (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985). The existing research showed that higher blame attribution leads to increased activism against a crisis-involved party (Coombs & Halladay, 1996; Ji & Kim, 2019). However, when it comes to participating in activism in support of a crisis-involved party, little is known about the role of blame attribution. We are particularly interested in investigating how blame attribution exerts influences on pro-politician activism. In other words, does lower internal attribution of crisis blame (i.e., blame in-crisis-party) lead to increased pro-politician activism, and/or does higher external attribution of crisis blame (i.e., blame external parties) lead to increased pro-politician activism?

This study attempts to answer this question by investigating both the internal and the external blame attribution-mediated process.

This study also explores how majority and like-minded public opinion perceptions lead people to attribute crisis blame and engage in pro-politician activism. Prior research has supported the notion that perceived majority opinion and like-minded opinion predict blame attribution and activism (e.g., Li & Su, 2020; Neubaum & Krämer, 2017; Scheufele, 2002; Tsfati et al., 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2012). What remains relatively unclear, however, is the interplay between individuals' perceptions of the majority opinion and like-minded opinion climates. Even if people perceive their opinion as being unaligned with the majority view, they may still speak up and participate in activism more actively when they perceive a like-minded opinion is present. Given this, an investigation into how the two public opinion perceptions interplay would surely offer insights into the mechanisms of online keyword pro-politician activism.

In addition, this study proposes that government controllability over crisis outcomes has a moderating role in the relationship between crisis blame attribution and pro-politician activism. Research in political communication has extensively tested the roles of primary control (e.g., political self-efficacy) and collective control (e.g., collective efficacy) to explain the publics' political participation (Bandura, 1986; Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). There has been a lack, however, of an investigation into how proxy control—perceived crisis outcome controllability toward proxy agents such as government—factors into the process. Government controllability, rooted in social cognitive theory, refers to the publics' forethoughtful assessments of the government as a suitable proxy control agent for deriving desirable crisis outcomes (Bandura, 1986; Ji & Kim, 2020). Given crisis blame attribution is made in hindsight in current literature, this study delineates the interplay of retrospective crisis blame attributions and forethoughtful assessment of a proxy agent's control capability of crisis outcomes in the online keyword activism process.

Context of Study

A recent politician's crisis in South Korea provides a suitable research setting for empirical investigation. In 2019, South Korea witnessed large-scale online keyword activism supporting Cho Kuk (hereafter Cho), the former Justice Minister. Cho was known to be the architect of President Moon Jae-In's progressive reform drive of the authoritative prosecutors' office and its excessive power² (T. Kim, 2019). Since President Moon nominated Cho for the Justice Minister position in August 2019, Cho has been involved in political turmoil. As a political figure, he was attacked by conservative mainstream news media over allegations of academic favors involving his daughter and some questionable financial investments of his wife.³ To respond to the allegations, Cho held an 11-hr marathon press conference on September 2, 2019 (Chung, 2019). Numerous viewers criticized mainstream news media for their redundant questions and lack of supporting evidence during the press conference (Chung, 2019).

Supporters of Cho particularly criticized the biased media practices, such as an extraordinary amount of news coverage on this scandal even when the allegations of his family remained unsubstantiated (S. Y. Choi, 2019; Ko, 2019). They claimed that the media were politically motivated, serving as a means to thwart the current liberal government's reform efforts. As a result, the news media was targeted as being the external party during this pro-politician activism. Using the major domestic portal/news aggregator platforms NAVER and DAUM, supporters organized and engaged in a series of online activist demonstrations, deploying such keywords as "support Cho Kuk appointment," "reform of the media," "fake news out," and "death of Korean journalism" (Chung, 2019; H. Kim, 2019). These keywords appeared as top trending keywords (Chung, 2019).

Literature Review

Crisis Blame Attribution

In trying to understand the psychological mechanisms of negative public responses to a crisis, researchers have considered a core construct to be crisis blame attribution (Coombs & Halladay, 1996; Kim, 2014). According to attribution theory, people attribute crisis blame to the in-crisis party (i.e., who is accused of wrongdoing). They so attribute based on a retrospective causality assessment of the crisis; that is, they identify two factors—locus and controllability of causality (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Weiner, 2006). When people perceive the crisis was caused by the in-crisis party (i.e., internal locus) rather than some external party, then they attribute more blame to the in-crisis party. Likewise, when people perceive a crisis could have been controlled by an in-crisis party (i.e., internal controllability), they attribute more blame. This internal locus aspect of crisis causality is among the most important criteria when people determine the extent to which the in-crisis party should be blamed (Weiner, 2006).

In the context of Cho's crisis, we consider Cho to be the in-crisis party and news media to be one of the potential external parties that can shoulder crisis blame from the public. It was because supporters of Cho tended to view that biased news media was the main instigator of the political turmoil. According to Reuters Institute (2019), Koreans revealed the lowest trust in news media among 38 countries included in its survey, with only 22% of the people having confidence in the mainstream news media. Mainstream news media moguls in Korea—such as Chosun, JoongAng, and DongA—have been closely aligned with and supported by the conservative right-wing camp (e.g., the previous two consecutive conservative governments) for more than 50 years, and as a result, they have flourished, being extremely influential in setting agendas and forming public opinion despite their politically biased (i.e., conservative-biased) journalism practices (Choi & Park, 2014; Park, 2017). Due to this conservative-dominated news media landscape in Korea, this study considers mainstream news media as a potential external party to shoulder crisis blame for the crisis.

Therefore, those who attribute low blame to Cho would be more likely to participate in pro-Cho activism (Weiner, 2006). They may think Cho has been wrongly

accused or unfairly treated; their assessment suggests to them that external actors such as news media are more at fault (Weiner, 2006). Thus, depending on public assessments of crisis causality locus (internal vs. external), people will vary in whom and how much they blame. When the internal party (i.e., Cho) is the target of blame, lower blame attribution predicts pro-Cho activism. In contrast, when the external party (i.e., news media) is the target of blame, higher blame attribution to news media leads to increased pro-Cho activism. Prior research also suggests that public perceptions of news media's bias on an issue promote pro-issue activism, as such perceptions motivate people to correct the biased views by engaging in activism (Feldman et al., 2017; Rojas, 2010).

Perceived Majority Opinion

People's inferences about majority public opinions have significant impacts on their attitudes and behaviors (Dvir-Gvirman et al., 2018; Scheufele, 2002). As argued in the spiral of silence theory, human beings, to avoid being isolated, naturally monitor whether an opinion is socially accepted or socially sanctioned (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Using a quasi-statistical sense, people who perceive prevailing opinion climates as being consistent with their own are more likely to express their opinions publicly than those who perceive such climates as being inconsistent with their own (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Similarly, social proof and social influence research state that when individuals determine whether a behavior is appropriate in a certain situation, they tend to use the behavior of others as a benchmark (Cialdini et al., 1999). As such, the manifest representation of majority attitudes would greatly affect individuals' attitudes and behaviors (Tsfati et al., 2014; Zerback et al., 2015). Especially, in times of crisis where high uncertainty is present, public perceptions of a majority opinion would greatly influence how people make sense of a crisis and assign blame, and such cognitive reactions to the crisis serve a fundamental psychological need, helping to shape their emotional and behavioral responses to the crisis (Weiner, 1985).

In times of a politician's crisis, as the politician is an accused party, the majority opinion on the politician tends to be negative in general. Thus, this study examines how perceived negative majority opinion affects people's crisis blame attribution and subsequent pro-politician online keyword activism. Based on the assumptions of the spiral of silence theory and social influence research (Cialdini et al., 1999; Noelle-Neumann, 1974), when people perceive majority opinion is negative toward a politician, they might infer that the politician should be blamed and thus would not engage in online keyword activism supporting the politician. Thus, this study hypothesizes that with the increase in the perceived majority opinion on Cho, Korean people would attribute more blame to Cho, which decreases their likelihood of participating in pro-Cho activism.

Taking a dual-agent approach to attribution (Weiner, 1985), people make attribution to not only the internal party but also to the external party. During Cho's crisis, Korean people also evaluated whether news media should be blamed. Noteworthy, how the blame-Cho relates to the perceived negative majority opinion will be opposite

to that of the blame-media (Weiner, 1985). When perceived negative majority opinion on Cho is relatively low, they may think Cho has been unfairly treated by news media and believe news media are more at fault (Chung, 2019). Such a blame-media attribution would motivate people to participate in pro-Cho activism.

The abovementioned discussions suggested mediating roles of both blame-Cho and blame-media in the relationship between perceived negative majority opinion on Cho and pro-Cho activism. Prior crisis literature has also endorsed the idea that crisis blame mediates the relationships between a variety of psychological perceptions and the joining in on online communicative behaviors (Coombs & Halladay, 1996; Zhang et al., 2018). Therefore, this study proposes the mediating role of two crisis blame attributions—internal blame attribution (blame-Cho hereafter) and external blame attribution (blame-media hereafter) in the process.

H1: Perceived negative majority opinion on Cho (a) increases blame attribution of Cho, and (b) such increased blame-Cho attribution, in turn, decreases pro-Cho activism participation (i.e., the mediating role of blame-Cho).

H2: Perceived negative majority opinion on Cho (a) decreases blame attribution of media, and (b) such decreased blame-media attribution in turn reduces pro-Cho activism participation (i.e., the mediating role of blame-media).

Perceived Like-Minded Opinion

The impacts of majority public opinions on attitudes and behaviors could also be affected by perceived like-minded opinions (Bakshy et al., 2015; Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). According to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), people tend to be affected by opinions that are consonant with their own attitudes and neglect inconsonant opinions. In general, like-minded people hold similar views on social issues, and people prefer to interact with like-minded people to avoid potential dissonance (Adams, 1961). Thus, individuals are also subjected to a great influence of like-minded opinions. Like-minded opinions influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors through triggering cognitive shortcuts about personal relevance (Bakshy et al., 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017) and in-group identification (Nekmat & Ismail, 2019). When individuals believe that an opinion is personally related or belongs to in-group members, they are more likely to support such an opinion and permit it to affect their behaviors (Bakshy et al., 2015; Nekmat & Ismail, 2019).

In today's social media era, the influence of like-minded opinions on an individual tends to be, thanks to the ubiquity of social media, larger than in the past. Before the social media era, legacy media served as the main source to inform individuals about the public opinion landscape (Gunther, 1998). Offline interpersonal conversations contribute to individuals' perceptions of a like-minded opinion climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Today, however, both mass and interpersonal communication have been converging on social media (Walther & Jang, 2012). Social media has also become a main source of public opinion climates (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). It has been found that today individuals' online social networks mainly consist of

like-minded people (Bakshy et al., 2015). People who share more similarities are likely to be socially connected through a process of friend selection. People who frequently interact tend to become more alike through a process of social influence (Albarracín & Shavitt, 2018). Through these processes, individuals are frequently exposed to like-minded opinions today. In this fashion, like-minded opinions tend to exert a greater influence today on public attitudes and behaviors than they did in the past.

As a result, the impacts of perceived majority opinions on individuals' attitudes and behaviors such as crisis blame attributions and activism are more likely to be moderated by perceived like-minded opinions (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2018; Sude et al., 2019). For instance, during Cho's crisis, when people perceived negative majority opinion on Cho, they would be subjected to the influence of majority opinion and attribute more blame to Cho. However, such relationships would be changed by perceived like-minded opinions. When perceived like-minded opinion is also negative toward Cho, the impacts of perceived majority opinion on blame-Cho would be enhanced. When perceived like-minded opinion on Cho is positive, the impacts of perceived majority opinion on blame-Cho would be offset to some degree. Thus, this study proposes a moderation effect of perceived like-minded opinion on the relationship between perceived majority opinion and blame-Cho. Such a moderation effect would also occur when blame-media is the consequence.

H3a: Perceived like-minded opinion moderates the relationship between majority opinion and blame-Cho.

H4a: Perceived like-minded opinion moderates the relationship between majority opinion and blame-media.

As discussed earlier, crisis blame attribution serves as a mediator in the relationship between perceived negative majority attitude and pro-Cho activism. The moderation effect of perceived like-minded opinion on the relationship between perceived negative majority attitude and crisis blame attribution would further affect subsequent pro-Cho activism. Thus, this study proposes moderated mediation effects as follows.

H3b: Perceived like-minded opinion moderates the *indirect* relationship between perceived majority opinion and pro-Cho activism through blame-Cho.

H4b: Perceived like-minded opinion moderates the *indirect* relationship between perceived majority opinion and pro-Cho activism through blame media.

Perceived Government Controllability of Crisis Outcomes

According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), in a complex and uncertain situation like a crisis, individuals tend to assess whether and which agent(s) can produce desirable crisis outcomes. The agent(s) may be the primary agent, proxy agents, or a collective agent (Bandura, 1986). In a crisis where people usually feel a lack of personal control, they often seek proxy or collective agents to exert control over crisis

outcomes (Bandura, 1986; Ji & Kim, 2020). Proxy control indicates that people exert control through external agents who are perceived to have power, expertise, and resources to influence desirable outcomes (Bandura, 1986). In contrast, collective control—so-called collective efficacy—signifies a public's shared belief in their collective power to derive desired crisis outcomes (Bandura, 1986). A good deal of research has supported the idea that collective efficacy serves as a crucial motivational factor leading people to participate in a variety of collective undertakings (e.g., Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). Given this, the current study focuses on the role played, as a proxy agent, by the perceived crisis outcome controllability of the government.

In political crises that involve politicians or political/social issues, one of the most relevant proxy control agents people can turn to is the government (Löblich & Wendelin, 2012). Governments can achieve desirable political crisis outcomes because they have legitimate power and expertise to make political and/or social issue-related decisions as well as the responsibility to respond to people's appeals (Campbell, 2007; Ji & Kim, 2020). People often call for the interventions of government agencies to foster desirable outcomes of a crisis regardless of the relevant domains—either public or business (Campbell, 2007; Heath & Palenchar, 2009). To achieve desirable outcomes, people tend to explore every possible avenue through employing available proxy agents and/or exerting collective power (Bandura, 1986). A recent study suggested that the more people believe a government could be a proxy agent to control crisis outcomes, the higher the likelihood that people will call for government intervention in the crisis (Ji & Kim, 2020). In political contexts, when people believe a government can respond to related issues, they would be more likely to engage in political activism (Feldman et al., 2017; Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003). Perceived government controllability in this study is thus defined as public perceptions of the government's capability to control and produce desirable crisis outcomes (Bandura, 1986).

Crisis research suggests that public's crisis responses such as boycott activism depend not only on the public's assessment of crisis blame but also their assessments of crisis outcome controllability (Barakat & Moussa, 2017; Weiner, 1995). Crisis blame is based on the assessment of crisis causes, that is, who caused the crisis and whether the crisis-involved party could have controlled it (Coombs & Halladay, 1996; Munyon et al., 2019). Crisis outcome controllability, on the other hand, is based on an assessment of who can derive desirable outcomes (Bandura, 1986). The process of crisis blame attribution is, in this regard, retrospective in nature; crisis outcome controllability is based on the exercise of forethought to direct actions to achieve desirable crisis outcomes (Bandura, 1986; Ji & Kim, 2020; Weiner, 1995). People act based on both retrospective crisis blame attributions and forethoughtful assessments of available agents' capability of controlling crisis outcomes. Given this, these two types of cognitive assessments would certainly interplay in predicting the public's online activism participation (Bandura, 1986; Weiner, 1995). Publics who perceive low government controllability over crisis outcomes would, regardless of their attribution levels, be less likely to participate in pro-Cho activism. This is because they do not believe the government is very capable of deriving desirable outcomes. This indicates the absence of the blame-Cho's effects on pro-Cho activism.

According to Olson's (1971) logic of collective action, people tend to be withdrawn from collective action when they believe it is likely to fail. In addition, perceived government controllability under a presidential system such as Korea can be largely related to individuals' political ideology or inclination (e.g., Republicans may see Democrat administrations as possessing low government controllability on any political issue and Democrats may see the reverse as well; Rudolph & Evans, 2005). Thus, those seeing administrations as having low government controllability would not participate in activism supporting the government official, regardless of their blame-Cho levels. However, for those who see administrations as having higher government controllability, their tendency to participate in pro-Cho activism would be more greatly affected by their blame-Cho attribution—more pro-Cho activism participation when blame-Cho attribution is low. The negative relationship between blame-Cho and pro-Cho activism would thus be contingent on the levels of government controllability. In the blame-media-mediated, pro-Cho activism process, those believing in low government controllability would not, regardless their blame-media levels, participate in pro-Cho activism; for those believing in higher government controllability, higher blame-media will lead to increased pro-Cho activism participation. Thus, we propose that government controllability plays a similar moderation role in the relationship between blame-media and pro-Cho activism. The direction, however, would be opposite to the blame-Cho-mediated model. That is, the positive relationship between blame-media and pro-Cho activism would be contingent on perceived levels of government controllability. This study thus proposes government controllability as a second-stage moderator having conditional direct relationships between the two types of blame attributions and pro-Cho activism in addition to conditional indirect relationships between majority opinion and pro-Cho activism through the two crisis blame attributions (see Figure 1).

H5: Government controllability moderates (a) the *negative* relationship between blame-Cho and pro-Cho activism and (b) the *negative indirect* relationship between perceived majority opinion and pro-Cho activism through blame-Cho.

H6: Government controllability moderates (a) the *positive* relationship between blame-media and pro-Cho activism and (b) the *negative indirect* relationship between perceived majority opinion and pro-Cho activism through blame-media.

Method

This study employed an online survey to collect data in South Korea with a stratified quota sampling method. The survey was administered using the consumer panels of a survey company specializing in opinion research, which consists of more than 1.5 million panelists. In exchange for their participation, participants received rewards. Given that the study concerns internet users' attitudes and online behaviors during the political figure's crisis in South Korea, having survey respondents who are internet users was critical. To further ensure the representativeness and the diversity of the sample, participants were recruited based on predetermined proportions of the population in

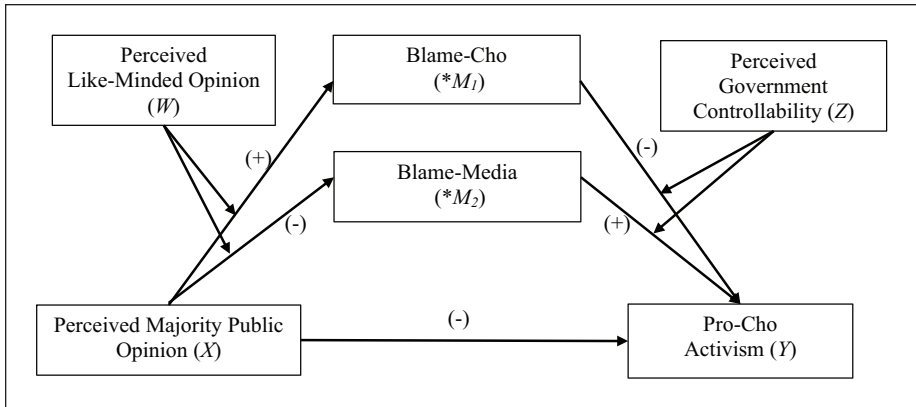


Figure 1. Proposed theoretical models.

* M_1 as a mediator for Model 1; M_2 for Model 2.

terms of geographic residence, gender, and age distributions following South Korean census data (National Bureau of Statistics of Korea, 2019). Data were collected in early October 2019, when the nation was still in turmoil over a political crisis. The sample consisted of responses from 1,000 participants; 50.8% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 43.68$, $SD = 13.46$, $\text{range}_{\text{age}} = 19\text{--}77$.⁴ The place of participants' residence was also representative of each of the 17 first-tier administrative divisions' populations.

Measure

The survey was administrated in Korean, and all items were measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale. To capture participants' perception of *negative majority opinion* (X) on Cho, 3 items were asked based on prior research (e.g., Choi et al., 2009): I believed that a majority of the Korean public (a) *were against*, (b) *criticized*, and (c) *did not support Cho* for the recent political issues ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.73$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$).

For *perceived negative like-minded opinion* (W) on Cho, the same 3 items were used, but researchers replaced "a majority of the Korean public" with "people who share similar political views with me" ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.71$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$).

Measures for *perceived government controllability* (Z , $M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.66$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$) were adapted from previous research (Bandura, 1986; Ji & Kim, 2020). Three items asked how strongly participants believed the government (a) could ensure the current crisis to be addressed properly, (b) could influence the crisis being resolved in ways people expected, and (c) was capable of producing desirable crisis outcomes.

Internal blame attribution, *Blame-Cho* (M_1 , $M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.86$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$) indicates Cho being blamed by publics; external blame attribution, *Blame-media*

(M_2 , $M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.63$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$) indicates news media being blamed. Measures with 3 items were adapted from previous research (Kim, 2014). The items included the following: I believe Cho, replaced to news media for *Blame-media*, (a) was responsible for, (b) should be held accountable for, and (c) should be blamed for the crisis.

Pro-Cho Activism (Y) refers to publics' participation in real-time online keywords activism on the news aggregators/portal platforms of NAVER and DAUM. Three items were used to ask how often respondents actively searched and typed "ProtectCho," "SupportChoAppointment," and "Keep it up, Cho Kuk," respectively (1 = *rarely*, 7 = *very often*; $M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.70$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Political inclination was measured and used as a covariate in all analyses (1 = *very conservative*, 7 = *very liberal*, $M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.09$). That is because under a presidential system such as Korea, people's perceptions of public opinion, crisis blame attribution in the political figure's crisis, and perceived government controllability would be largely related to individuals' political inclination (Rudolph & Evans, 2005).

Construct Validity Tests of Measurements

To ensure the adequacy of the measurements, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed for each of the two proposed dual stage moderated mediation models. The results suggested a good model fit for both measurement models (Model 1 [*Blame-Cho* as mediator]: $\chi^2/df = 2.15 < 3.0$, comparative fit index [CFI] = .99, normed fit index [NFI] = .99, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .03; Model 2 [*Blame-media* as mediator]: $\chi^2/df = 2.37 < 3.0$, CFI = .99, NFI = .99, RMSEA = .03). All constructs in each model demonstrated satisfactory convergent and discriminant validities (Hair et al., 2009; see Table 1).

Analyses

All hypotheses were tested using two dual-stage moderated mediation models, that is, model 21, of PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2018a; 10,000 bootstrap samples for bias-corrected bootstrap, 95%). It is appropriate to use Model 21 when the moderators are split between stages of the mediation process (Hayes, 2018b). In Model 21, perceived majority opinion served as the antecedent (X) and pro-Cho activism (Y) as the consequent; blame-Cho or blame-media (M) functioned as a mediator; perceived like-minded opinion (W) was the first-stage moderator while perceived government controllability (Z) was the second-stage moderator; demographics and political inclination were included as covariates. PROCESS Model 21 automatically calculates coefficients for direct effects and interaction effects, constructs the index of moderated mediation, and provides bootstrap confidence intervals for moderated mediation effects. When a confidence interval provided in the index of moderated mediation PROCESS result does not include zero, it is inferred that the mediation is moderated (see Hayes, 2018a, pp. 424–425, for more details).

Table 1. Discriminant and Convergent Validities of Constructs and Correlations Matrix.

Model 1: Crisis Blame-Cho (M_1) as a mediator									
Constructs	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	X	M_1	Y	W	Z
Majority Public Opinion (X)	.96	.89	.69	.39	.94				
Blame-Cho (M_1)	.97	.86	.69	.43	.83	.93			
Pro-Cho Activism (Y)	.89	.74	.19	.14	-.29	-.35	.86		
Like-Minded Opinion (W)	.96	.88	.59	.42	.72	.77	-.44	.94	
Government Controllability (Z)	.97	.91	.38	.29	-.53	-.58	.39	-.61	.95
Model 2: Crisis Blame-Media (M_2) as a mediator									
Constructs	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	X	M_2	Y	W	Z
Majority Public Opinion (X)	.96	.89	.51	.28	.94				
Blame-Media (M_2)	.96	.85	.28	.22	-.50	.92			
Pro-Cho Activism (Y)	.89	.73	.19	.14	-.29	.34	.86		
Like-Minded Opinion (W)	.96	.89	.51	.34	.72	-.53	-.44	.94	
Government Controllability (Z)	.97	.90	.38	.26	-.53	.48	.39	-.61	.95

Note. The square root of AVE on the diagonal. CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; MSV = maximum shared variance; ASV = average shared variance.

Results

As **H1a** and **H2a** proposed, perceived majority opinion is positively associated with blame-Cho, $b = .71$, $SE = .05$, $p < .00001$, confidence intervals (CIs) = [.61, .81], but negatively with blame-media ($b = -.45$, $SE = .07$, $p < .00001$, CIs = [-.60, -.31]). Hence, H1a and H2a were supported. Political inclination revealed a negative relationship with blame-Cho but a positive relationship blame-media: more liberal participants blamed the in-crisis party, Cho much less than conservative ones ($b = -.08$, $SE = .03$, $p < .05$, CIs = [-.14, -.02]) and blamed news media much more than conservative ones ($b = .11$, $SE = .05$, $p < .05$, CIs = [.02, .20]; see Table 2).

H1b and **H2b** posited the mediating roles of the two mediators. Both pro-Cho activism models revealed significant moderated mediations as the 95% CIs did not include zero (blame-Cho-mediated: *Index Effect* = .002, $SE = .001$, CIs = [.002, .003]; blame-media-mediated: *Index Effect* = .004, $SE = .002$, CIs = [.002, .007]). As the moderated mediation effects were significant, the mediation effects of blame-Cho (H1b) and blame-Media (H2b) were inferred as significant (Hayes, 2018a). Hence, H1b and H2b were supported. Political inclination did not have a significant impact on pro-Cho activism participation in both mediation models.

As to moderation effects of perceived like-minded opinion (H3s) for blame-Cho-mediated Model, like-minded public opinion significantly moderated the *positive* relationship between majority opinion and blame-Cho ($b = -.03$, $SE = .01$, $p < .01$, CIs

= $[-.046, -.006]$; see Table 2). More negative like-minded opinion perceptions toward Cho led to higher crisis blame-Cho ($b = .48, SE = .05, p < .00001, CIs = [.38, .58]$). As **H3a** predicted, the positive effects of majority opinion on crisis blame-Cho were more greatly mitigated when like-minded opinion was highly negative ($b = .535, SE = .034, CIs = [.469, .601]$) than when it was less negative ($b = .639, SE = .031, CIs = [.579, .699]$; see Table 3). Thus, **H3a** was supported. The perceived like-minded opinion also moderated the indirect relationship between majority opinion and pro-Cho activism through blame-Cho, supporting **H3b** (see Table 3). The indirect effects of perceived majority opinion on pro-Cho activism through blame-Cho were more greatly mitigated by highly negative like-minded opinion perceptions, that is, decreasing as like-minded opinion became more negative (see Table 3).

As for the moderation effects of like-minded opinion (H4s) for blame-media-mediated Model, like-minded opinion also significantly moderated the *negative* relationship between majority opinion and blame-media ($b = .07, SE = .01, p < .00001, CIs = [.037, .093]$; see Table 2). More negative like-minded opinion perceptions toward Cho led to lower blame-media ($b = -.57, SE = .07, p < .00001, CIs = [-.71, -.42]$). The negative effects of majority opinion on blame-media were more greatly mitigated as perceived like-minded opinion increased, supporting the mitigating effects of like-minded opinion (**H4a**). However, different from the blame-Cho-mediated model, the effect of majority opinion on blame-media even disappeared due to the extreme moderation effects of like-minded opinion when like-minded opinion was highly negative (see Table 3). That is, when like-minded opinion was highly negative, the effects of majority opinion on blame-media were absent (see Figure 2). But when like-minded opinion was moderately negative, the negative effects of majority opinion on blame-media were significant, decreasing as perceived like-minded opinion became more negative. This suggests like-minded public opinion functions as a clear boundary condition for the relationship between majority opinion and blame-media, not simply functioning as a significant contributory moderator as it did for the blame-Cho-mediated model. The indirect effect of majority opinion on pro-Cho activism through blame-media also decreased as like-minded opinion became more negative (see Table 3), supporting **H4b**. But the indirect impact of majority opinion became insignificant when like-minded opinion was extremely negative, even nullifying its indirect effect on pro-Cho activism (see Table 3).

Also a significant moderator of the negative relationship between blame-Cho and pro-activism was government controllability, supporting **H5a** ($b = -.056, SE = .015, p < .0003, CIs = [-.086, -.027]$). Higher levels of government controllability led to increased participation in pro-Cho activism ($b = .56, SE = .08, t = 6.70, p < .00001, CIs = [.396, .724]$). As predicted by H5a, the negative impact of blame-Cho on pro-Cho activism disappeared when government controllability was low and was amplified as perceived government controllability increased (see Figure 3 and Table 3). The indirect effects of majority opinion on pro-Cho activism through blame-Cho were also absent for the low government controllability, but the indirect effects became stronger as government controllability increased for average or high government controllability (see Table 3 for the conditional indirect effects). Thus, **H5b** was also supported.

Table 3. Moderations of Perceived Like-Minded Opinion and Government Controllability in the Dual-Stage Moderated Mediation Models.

Conditional direct effects of X on Mediators at the values of W and Z

Model 1: Blame-Cho (M_1) as a mediator

Like-Minded Op. (W)	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low	.64***	.03	.58	.70
Average	.60***	.03	.55	.64
High	.54***	.03	.47	.60
Gov. Controllability (Z)	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low	-.00 ^a	.06	-.12	.12
Average	-.11*	.05	-.21	-.02
High	-.23***	.05	-.33	-.12

Model 2: Blame-Media (M_2) as a mediator

Like-Minded Op. (W)	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low	-.28***	.04	-.37	-.19
Average	-.17***	.04	-.24	-.10
High	-.02 ^a	.05	-.11	.08
Gov. Controllability (Z)	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low	.12**	.04	.04	.21
Average	.25***	.03	.18	.32
High	.37***	.05	.28	.47

Conditional Indirect effects of X on Y through M by the first-stage W and the second stage Z

Model 1: Blame-Cho (M_1) as a mediator

Like-Minded Op. (W)	Govt. Control (Z)	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low	Low	-.00 ^a	.04	-.07	.07
Low	Average	-.07	.03	-.13	-.01
Low	High	-.14	.04	-.22	-.07
Average	Low	-.00 ^a	.04	-.07	.07
Average	Average	-.07	.03	-.12	-.01
Average	High	-.13	.04	-.20	-.07
High	Low	-.00 ^a	.03	-.06	.06
High	Average	-.06	.03	-.11	-.01
High	High	-.12	.03	-.18	-.06
Index of moderated-moderated mediation		.00	.00	.00	.00

Model 2: Blame-Media (M_2) as a mediator

Like-Minded Op. (W)	Govt. Control (Z)	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low	Low	-.03	.01	-.06	-.01
Low	Average	-.07	.01	-.10	-.04
Low	High	-.10	.02	-.15	-.06
Average	Low	-.02	.01	-.04	-.01
Average	Average	-.04	.01	-.07	-.02
Average	High	-.06	.02	-.10	-.03
High	Low	-.00 ^a	.01	-.02	.01
High	Average	-.00 ^a	.02	-.03	.02
High	High	-.01 ^a	.02	-.05	.04
Index of moderated-moderated mediation		.00	.00	.00	.01

Note. CI = confidence interval.

^aItalicized numbers indicate no effects as CIs included zero.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

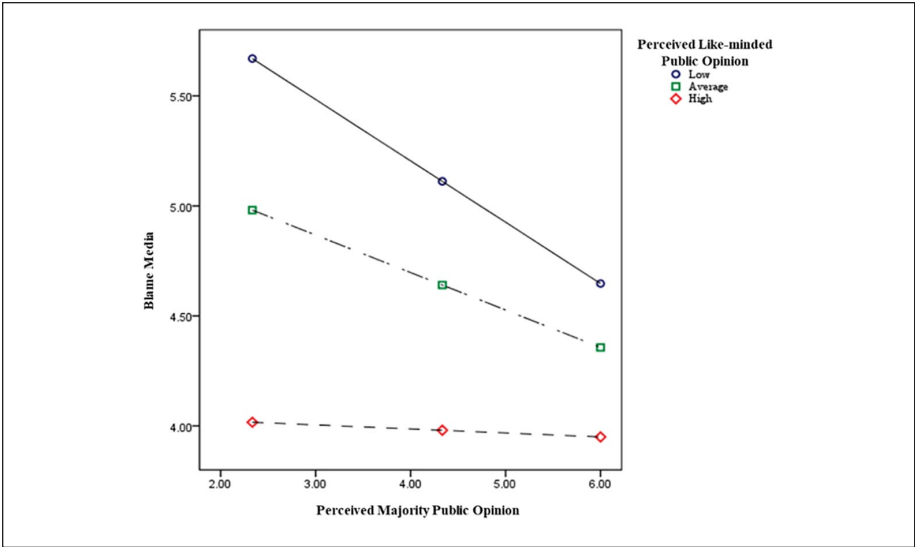


Figure 2. Moderation of perceived like-minded public opinion in the relationship between perceived majority public opinion and blame-media.

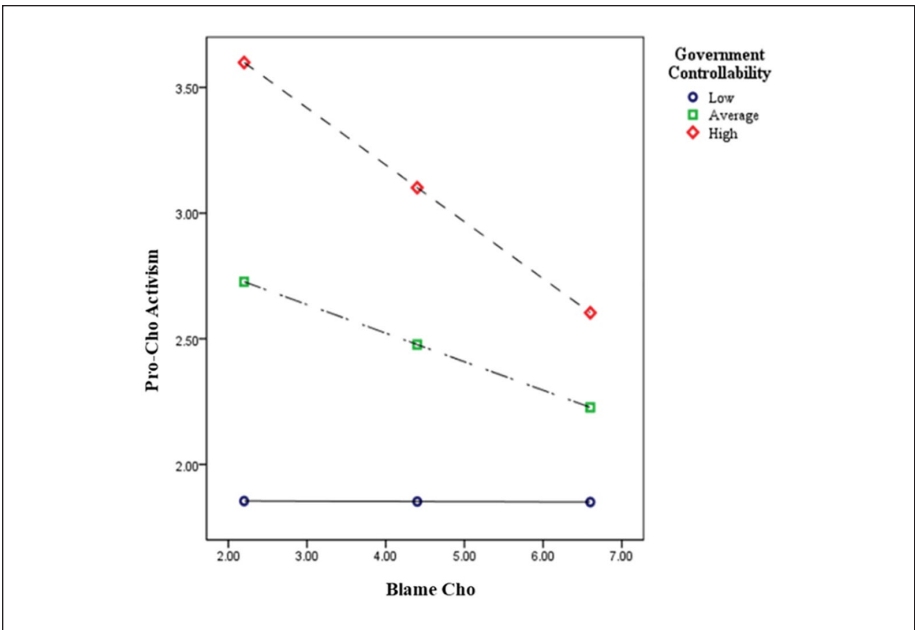


Figure 3. Moderation of perceived government controllability in the relationship between Blame-Cho and Pro-Cho activism.

In the crisis blame-media-mediated model, government controllability was also significant second-stage moderator of the positive relationship between blame-media and pro-Cho activism ($b = .063, SE = .016, p < .0002, CIs = [.032, .094]$). However, there was still a significant positive effect of blame-media on pro-Cho activism even for low government controllability ($b = .122, SE = .04, p < .005, CIs = [.038, .210]$), inconsistent with the original prediction (**H6a**), which proposed such an effect would disappear for low government controllability. But the positive effect of blame-media on pro-Cho activism increased as government controllability increased (see Table 3). Thus, **H6a** was partially supported. The indirect effects of majority opinion on pro-Cho activism through blame-media were also still significant for the low government controllability. **H6b** proposed that with low government controllability such indirect effects would disappear, so it was not supported here. But as **H6b** predicted, the negative indirect effects increased as government controllability increased (see Table 3). Thus, **H6b** was partially supported.

Discussion

Using a Korean political figure's crisis (i.e., Cho crisis) as a research context, this study uncovers the psychological mechanisms regarding why some Korean publics participated in pro-politician online keyword activism. Our study finds that (a) both of the dual crisis blame attributions (i.e., blame in-crisis party and external parties) played mediating roles in explaining pro-politician activism but in opposite directions—that is, external attribution of crisis blame (i.e., blame news media) facilitated pro-politician activism, while internal attribution of crisis blame (i.e., blame in-crisis party) hindered participation in pro-politician activism; (b) perceived like-minded opinions on the politician functioned as moderating roles in the relationships between perceived majority opinion and pro-politician activism; and (c) perceived government controllability also played moderating roles in the relationships between the dual crisis blame attributions and pro-politician activism.

Specifically, this study finds that in both the blame-Cho- and blame-media-mediated processes, crisis blame functions as a significant mediator in linking the relationships between perceived public opinion and pro-Cho activism. In support of previous crisis research on blame attribution's role in predicting negative public responses (e.g., Kim, 2014; Zhang et al., 2018), this study provides additional empirical evidence on its mediating role in explaining pro-politician activism where publics are in support of the accused party. In the context of Cho's crisis, the lower the internal blame attribution, the more pro-Cho activism. The higher the external blame attribution, the more pro-Cho activism. This suggests that blame attribution is a core cognitive construct in understanding the mechanisms of both positive and negative public crisis responses, functioning as a mediator in predicting publics' collective online keyword activism. Crisis scholars have long supported the idea that crisis blame serves as a mediator that links public-related (e.g., past experiences and expectations), accused-party-related (e.g., performance history), and crisis-related (e.g., severity) factors with ultimate crisis responses (e.g., reputation evaluations, word of mouth, purchase intentions, and

boycott behaviors; e.g., Kim, 2014; Tao, 2018). However, previous studies have rarely investigated how crisis blame leads to online keyword activism or how varying crisis blame attributions function differently as mediators in the context of pro-politician activism. Through investigating pro-politician activism, this study adds fresh evidence to a growing body of blame attribution literature in the presence of dual agents bearing crisis blame attributions.

The most important insights and contributions this study makes to extant crisis and political communication research (Bandura, 1986; Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2018; Sude et al., 2019) concern the moderating roles of perceived like-minded opinion and government controllability play in the pro-politician activism process. Our findings suggest that these two psychological perceptions function as significant moderators in both blame-mediated models. In both routes, the effect of perceived majority opinion on blame attribution becomes smaller as people perceive like-minded opinions as becoming extremely negative toward the crisis. In contrast, government controllability intensifies the effect that crisis blame attribution has on pro-Cho activism, and such a magnifying effect increases as people perceive government controllability as being stronger in both routes. Still, a decisive game-changer differs depending on the locus of blame mediators.

In the blame in-crisis-party mediated model (blame-Cho), the game changer was perceived government controllability rather than perceived like-minded opinion although both functioned as moderators. For people who perceive the government as having low controllability, there was neither mediation effect of blame attribution nor moderation effect of like-minded opinion. That is, regardless of the perceived majority opinion, like-minded opinion, and levels of blame-Cho, this segment did not participate in pro-Cho activism. Their non-participation suggests that this segment, when settling on a course of action, disregards cognitive assessments of blame attributions; instead, they seem to gravitate toward their beliefs regarding the government. When people do not consider the government capable of achieving desirable outcomes, they would not exert pressure on the proxy agent but feel frustrated and abstain from collective actions (Bandura, 1986; Ji & Kim, 2020; Olson, 1971).

On the other hand, the game-changer in the blame external-party-mediated model (i.e., blame-media) is not perceived government controllability but perceived like-minded opinion. For people within a highly negative like-minded opinion toward the politician, Cho, there was neither a mediation effect of blame-media attribution nor a moderation effect of government controllability. This suggests that people who perceived like-minded opinions as strongly negative toward the crisis declined to participate in pro-politician activism. They declined regardless of perceived majority opinion, blame-media levels, or government controllability, thereby nullifying the effects that perceived majority opinion has on blame attributions and pro-politician activism. For the blame in-crisis party-mediated processes, like-minded perception also significantly mitigated the relationship strength that the majority opinion perception had with blame-Cho and pro-Cho activism. Nevertheless, these moderation effects were not that decisive. In the blame-Cho-mediated process, when people perceived a strongly negative like-minded opinion toward Cho, the opinion climate held less sway over

them than it did over their counterparts who perceived a more positive like-minded opinion on Cho. Thus as like-minded perception becomes extremely negative toward Cho, there is a weakening of the effect of majority opinion on the blame-Cho-mediated pro-Cho activism. In contrast, the effect of majority opinion on blame-media-mediated activism can in fact be nullified by like-minded opinion when such opinion on Cho is extremely negative.

These findings are in line with the argument from theories of persuasion and attitude changes suggesting that those with stronger attitudes or perceptions are less likely to change their beliefs and that stronger opinion holders are more resistant to persuasion (e.g., Krosnick & Petty, 1995). Our findings imply that when two opinion climates are contradictory, those with strongly valenced like-minded opinions on Cho are more resistant to the majority public opinion and can even, when adopting courses of actions or assessing blame attributions, completely disregard it. Recent research claims that like-minded media exposure leads people to have biased public opinion perceptions (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2018). That is, like-minded media exposure leads people to incorrectly conclude that the majority view is aligned with their own views based on an overestimation of like-minded views and an underestimation of unlike-minded views; such a biased perception leads to political participation (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2018). In this case, the perceived majority opinion climate is seen as the outcome of exposure to like-minded views and as a mediator between like-minded media exposure and political participation. This could be one possible psychological mechanism, especially for those with partisan media news consumption patterns. However, it is not just from exposure to like-minded media that people perceive majority public opinion climates; it is also from unlike-minded media and, when so exposed, they are motivated to become politically active (Scheufele et al., 2006; Zerback et al., 2015). Thus, we argue that an alternative mechanism leading to online keyword activism could be the following: Each opinion climate, rather than one leading to the other, offsets the other's influence on online keyword activism through blame attributions. In some cases, a strongly valenced, like-minded perception even nullifies the potential effects that perceived majority opinion climates have on cognitive assessments of blame attributions and online keyword activism.

All in all, based on the findings, we argue that what encourages people to participate in pro-politician activism is driven by perceiving like-minded public opinions as being not at all negative, and such mechanisms are mediated by external attribution of blame (e.g., blame external parties such as news media). On the contrary, what keeps people from participating in pro-politician activism is better explained by the low perceived proxy crisis outcome controllability of the government mediated by internal attribution of blame (e.g., blame in-crisis party, Cho).

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to theory building in crisis communication research related to attribution theory (Weiner, 2006). It does so by providing empirical evidence on two unique boundary conditions regarding the potential effects that majority public

opinion and crisis blame attributions have in the process of pro-politician activism. For those with very low perceived government controllability of desirable crisis outcomes, blame attribution may not predict or explain the publics' participation in online activism. That is, blame attribution does not function as a mediator between publics' psychological factors of the perceived majority opinion and online activism. For people with highly negative, like-minded perceptions, gauging the majority opinion climate with their own views may not change how they originally judge a crisis. That is, their blame attribution remains consistent even when they discover their views are inconsistent with the majority opinion climate. For these people, crisis blame does not function as a mediator between the perceived majority opinion and pro-politician activism. In politically polarized conditions, extremely valenced, like-minded opinion perceptions nullify the potential effects that a majority opinion climate could have on their blame attribution and pro-politician activism. These findings contribute to attribution theory building on crisis communication research by fortifying the theory's boundary conditions of when crisis blame attributions may not function as the linkage (Weiner, 2006).

Both boundary conditions found in this study strongly support the basic idea of confirmation bias (Wason, 1960); participants tended to gravitate toward their own views such as like-minded views and perceived government controllability. The decisive driving factors that keep people from participating in pro-politician activism in a political figure's crisis are either highly negative, like-minded opinion climates or extremely low perceived government controllability over crisis outcomes. In a similar vein, people tend to be motivated to pro-politician activism by two driving forces—like-minded opinion climate perceived to be not at all negative and high perceived government controllability. In pro-Cho activism contexts, people tend to attribute low blame to the in-crisis party and high blame to the external party. And this retrospective cognitive blame assessment and the forethoughtful assessment of high government controllability are certainly what lead them to participate in pro-Cho activism. The findings add to the latest evidence supporting the idea that the publics' political participation could be driven by confirmation bias (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2018; Sude et al., 2019).

Limitations and Future Research

Despite these useful insights, our study is certainly not without its limitations. Given that this study adopted an online panel survey with a quota sampling method, the sample is quasi-representative of the target population. It should also be noted that our survey respondents were recruited from a third-party provider with compensation, which may introduce self-selection biases. Thus, the findings cannot be entirely generalizable to the South Koreans. In addition, this study did not control social media usage because the pro-politician activism we studied occurred in the highly dispersed online portal sites. Social media usage would be an important covariate in the process of certain online activism, such as hashtag (#) activism. It also is limited in a survey's capability of detecting causal relationships. Moreover, this study presumed perceived

majority public opinion to be a predictor of online keyword activism (i.e., pro-politician activism). However, it can be considered a consequence of online keyword activism instead: that is, online keyword activism can serve as an antecedent of majority public opinion perceptions. The bandwagon effect of social media provides insight into how trending words affect people's perceptions and statistical inferences about public opinion climates. Given that both directions are feasible, our study encourages scholars to further explore the causality between perceived majority public opinion and online keyword activism and identify potential factors for determining such causality. Our findings might also be subject to Korean political environments, not generalizable to other countries or systems. Future research is recommended to see if the boundary conditions found herein hold in other environments or contexts.

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Notes

1. While hashtag activism involves the use of keywords after the hashtag (#) symbol, for those new media platforms which do not provide a hashtag function, the keywords themselves can be located and promoted as part of top trending keywords or hot issue topics on the platforms, ensuring high visibility (Thieme, 2003).
2. South Korean prosecutors have exclusive authority and excessive powers to indict and seek warrants for suspects under investigation and exercise control over police investigative activities. In Korea, it is prosecutors, not grand juries, that issue indictments. Past conservative governments have been accused of using such prosecutorial powers to suppress their opponents (T. Kim, 2019).
3. As of September 2020, in the first trial, most of the charges against Cho and his family were found not guilty (Yoo, 2020), of which the media rarely reported (Citizens' Coalition for Democratic Media, 2020).
4. According to the 2019 Population and Housing Census, the median age of Koreans was 43.7 years, and 50.12% were male.

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