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Online engagement of active communicative behaviors and news consumption on Internet portal sites

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Abstract

Through a quantitative content analysis, this study examines how varying online communicative behaviors are connected to news characteristics of focus, tone, and media framing of crisis communication during the South Korean Candlelight Revolution that led to the ouster of former President Park in 2017. This work suggests that, when the news stance was positive toward or the focus was on Park, Koreans were more active in showing disapproval through comments posted and anger expressed; when the news stance was negative toward Park or the focus was anti-Park, Koreans were more tacitly supportive, clicking likes more. This work also suggests that news media performed active frame-setting of Park's crisis-response strategies by presenting more defensive strategies than accommodative ones. Publics' news consumption of media-framed defensive crisis-response strategies tended to elicit more active online public engagement than when such media framing was absent.

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In March 2017, Korea's Constitutional Court ousted, for the first time in its history, a sitting president – Park Geun-hye (Ock, 2017). This was in condemnation of her involvement in the extortion and abuse of power involving her long-term confidante, Choi Soon-sil (Won, 2016). This influence-peddling scandal provides researchers a unique opportunity to understand the role of online public engagement and news consumption. South Koreans were very active online through petitions and comment posting/sharing, not just in offline civic protests (Won, 2016). What made the bottom-up South Korean Candlelight Revolution unique was that it was characterized as more expressive and extensive both online and offline than previous movements (Ock, 2017).

Previous research has documented well the fact that news consumption on various media platforms leads to the increased political discussion online and offline (Shah et al., 2005). However, relatively limited research has mapped when and how publics exhibit varying online engagement behaviors (e.g. clicking likes, posting comments) as they respond, during a political scandal, to such news characteristics as its focus, tone, and media-framed crisis-response strategies. The present study, therefore, explores publics' collective online communicative behaviors and emotions expressed as responses to news consumption during the Park scandal.

News consumption experience on digital media is distinct from that on traditional media (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019). With increased online news consumption, people are no longer passive receivers of news. By liking or posting comments in real time, on the one hand, individuals can be active participants in political discussions of online news content (Halupka, 2014). On the other hand, through collective online user behaviors, individuals can become generators of social cues of endorsement or system cues regarding news content; such cues include statistics of most-popular news ratings, popular opinions, or hot issues (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Sundar, 2008). These system cues can further trigger publics' heuristics on consensus or majority attitudes on the issue and eventually influence their subsequent behaviors of political expression (Sundar, 2008; Yang, 2016). This study builds on the literature of publics' consensus heuristics triggered by system-generated cues (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Walther and Jang, 2012) and theories of the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and social influence of conformity (Turner, 1991). In so doing, this study assumes that people become more active and engaged by leaving more comments facing a counter-attitudinal news article when their opinions are perceived to be in accordance with prevailing ones.

The current study also explores how people reacted to media-framed crisis-response strategies. Crisis communication literature has extensively confirmed that defensive strategies such as denial lead to increased public blame and other negative attitudinal and behavioral responses when it seems plausible that the accused is in the wrong, (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; McDonald et al., 2010). This study thus argues that when the news presented media-framed defensive strategies of Park, people felt more negative toward the news.

This study delineates how varying online communicative behaviors, behaviors that require different levels of engagement (i.e. likes vs comments; Ksiazek et al., 2016), are connected to online news characteristics of focus, tone, and media framing of crisis communication. In doing so, the study sheds lights on the emerging phenomenon of active online engagement in times of a high-profile social crisis (Halupka, 2014; Lim, 2017).

The study also offers useful insights into how South Koreans utilized online news consumption platforms to publicly share their political stances regarding the scandal through collective user behaviors of placing comments, venting anger, and clicking likes.

Context of study: A summary of the Park scandal

In late October of 2016, the public became aware, through the initial news reports by JTBC, of Choi Soon-sil's outsized influence on Park – from such mundane matters as Park's wardrobe to more important matters as her speeches and even a critical national budget decision (Harris, 2017). Soon, her impeachment and lawful punishment were being called for by South Koreans who participated in candlelight rallies (Won, 2016). In attempts to turn the tide of public sentiment, Park made three televised announcements. In her first address, Park claimed that Choi's influence was limited to draft speeches during the first months of her presidency. Producing evidence from Choi's tablet computer, JTBC refuted these claims. Also found on Choi's tablet were many other classified Blue House documents that should never have been in the hands of a civilian (Harris, 2017).

Protests against Park continued to grow, with her approval rating plummeting to 5 percent (Park and Kim, 2016). To restore calm, Park made a second public address on 4 November 2016. In this speech, she expressed contrition for her personal relationship with Choi and that she was willing to allow an investigation by an independent counsel team to proceed. Following this address, however, Park refused to cooperate with the independent counsel. Despite mounting calls for her resignation, however, Park stalled and resisted stepping down. On 29 November, Park made her third and last public address, denying all the accusations and charges against her. Nonetheless, bowing to pressure, she asked the National Assembly to decide how and when she should step down (Park and Kim, 2016). On 3 December (the sixth straight weekend of protests), in a rejection of Park's third public address, 1.7 million South Koreans rallied in Seoul (Ock, 2017). Massive public protests pushed reluctant lawmakers to cast their vote, on 9 December, to impeach the president (for impeachment: 234; against: 56; Won, 2016). Her power as the president was suspended immediately (Harris, 2017). The protests against Park never relented until she was officially removed from office in March, 2017. A total of 17 million Koreans participated in candlelight rallies to protest against Park over 23 consecutive weekends with no reports of violence (Ock, 2017). In Korea, this historic political movement came to be known as the Candlelight Revolution (Won, 2016).

Korean context of news consumption

According to Reuters Institute (2016), the most dominant news consumption platforms in Korea are the domestic Web portal sites of news aggregators, NAVER and DAUM. These platforms provide aggregated news content from various news providers in a single location through web sites and mobile applications; they also offer system-generated statistics of hot news topics, rankings, and most-popular posts (Lee and Jang, 2010). Eighty-six percent of Koreans consume news online, surpassing news consumption through any other media (e.g. TV or print), and the main source of online news

consumption is through NAVER with 66 percent of people accessing news through that platform, followed by 41 percent accessing it through DAUM (Reuters Institute, 2016). The popularity among Koreans of consuming news through portal sites is interesting, given the decreasing popularity of portal sites in other countries. Only 9 percent of Americans and 6 percent of British, for example, use news aggregators as their main source of news (Reuters Institute, 2016).

The Korean popularity of portal sites is due to the platforms' active efforts in engaging their readers through providing a stage for public reactions and system-generated cues (Lee and Jang, 2010). Users are able to express their opinions and give vent to their emotions through online comments and clicking on likes, while also seeing how other users feel. Readers' comments on Korean portal sites' news articles have become one of its signature characteristics (Kim et al., 2016). Approximately 82 percent of Koreans reported having read online comments posted under news articles on portal sites to gauge how others felt (Kim et al., 2016).

Public emotions in crisis

In this study, emotions are defined as 'organized psychological reactions to news about ongoing relationships with the environment' (Lazarus, 1991: 38). As a reaction to external stimuli such as imminent social crises, people often feel discrete emotions such as anger (Iyer et al., 2007). These discrete emotions often reflect unique relationships between people and their surrounding environment, and these unique relationships lead to motivation formations for different actions (Lazarus, 1991). When people felt indignant with a party that caused a crisis, their motivational goal for further actions might be the exertion of collective power against the party and venting their negative emotions (Iyer et al., 2007).

Research on political communication (e.g. Shah et al., 2005) and crisis communication (e.g. Kim and Cameron, 2011) addresses different types of emotions people feel during and after a crisis. People often feel negative emotions, in response to crisis-related news, as crisis imposes much of psychological stress on them (Kim and Cameron, 2011). Depending on the types of emotions people feel in times of crisis, their communication and behavioral tendencies also differ (Grappi and Romani, 2015). People who feel anger tend to have stronger intentions to perform negative word-of-mouth and exert negative attitudes toward an organization in crisis (Kim and Cameron, 2011). According to Berger and Milkman (2012), one of the most important predictors of public engagement, during times of crisis, in social media communication, is anger. Emotional venting and the seeking of emotional support have been identified as primary reasons why people are actively involved in communicative behavior on social media (Duhachek, 2005).

Digital media and online engagement of communicative behavior

Digital media facilitates information dissemination and sharing by providing communication infrastructure online among decentralized individuals (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). By providing system-generated consensus heuristics such as most-liked posts or

trending words, this new media landscape gives rise to fast-forming public opinion (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Sundar, 2008). Such a landscape also helps expedite the mobilizing of collective actions through information exchange and easier coordination of such actions (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Accordingly, what constitutes meaningful political participation has changed. As a distinctive form of activism, online engagement, such as clicking likes or posting online comments, has become prominent among the public (Halupka, 2014).

Different from earlier perspectives that viewed online engagement as 'an inferior mode of participation' (Halupka, 2014: 117) or not a real political engagement (Skoric, 2012), online political participation has empowered people to publicly declare their political stances and is certainly considered a meaningful new form of political activism (Halupka, 2014). The fact that online engagement may arguably require less time and commitment (Skoric, 2012) does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that online activism is unsubstantial (Halupka, 2014). In fact, people take part in collective actions when they perceive the costs to be low enough and the benefits sufficiently high (Chong, 1991). Any social media user can easily engage, at a low cost, in online activism through posting, sharing, and using hashtags, thus fulfilling their expressive social and political needs (Chong, 1991; Halupka, 2014).

Technological affordances provide users system-generated information cues such as most-viewed, most-liked, and most-commented news (Sundar, 2008). Such system-generated cues are automatically computed based on collective user behaviors, that is, the aggregates of all users' individual online communicative behaviors (Sundar, 2008). These system-generated cues trigger users' heuristic judgment on popularity, salience, and collective endorsement of news and public opinion climate (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Sundar, 2008; Yang, 2016). Through offering people popular news topics of public interest as well as aggregated ratings of other users, system cues certainly help users estimate the public opinion climate, and in turn affect their subsequent behaviors (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Walther and Jang, 2012). Especially in times of crisis, these system-generated cues trigger consensus heuristics, driving people to estimate the negative impact the crisis is having on a general society and to become more active in calling for societal solutions (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Lim, 2017).

Much of the literature from a variety of disciplines has consistently supported that heuristics regarding consensus or majority attitudes greatly influence people's behaviors, including that of voting, purchasing, consuming news, and so on (Lee and Jang, 2010; Van der Meer et al., 2016). Such impacts have also been well-documented by classic theories of communication and psychology. According to the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and social influence of conformity (Turner, 1991), people become more active in expressing their opinions when they perceive their opinions are aligned with prevailing public opinion. Thus, this study argues that people tend to become more vocal and engaging to counter-attitudinal news when their views are consonant with perceived overall consensus.

Moreover, research on news consumption has indicated people may exhibit varying online communicative behaviors depending on their agreement levels toward online news content (Ksiazek et al., 2016; Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015). News eliciting stronger disagreement among people – such as political or controversial social issues – tend to

receive more online comments than other types of news that may elicit general agreement (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015). A recent study also found that people tend to have higher motivations to engage with social media in the presence of political disagreement (Lane et al., 2017). This further suggests that people may post comments to counter-argue the views of news with which they disagree. Similarly, people tend to reveal agreement with the news by clicking 'likes'.

The Park scandal prompted immediate massive public protests, online and offline (Park and Kim, 2016). Koreans could thus easily confirm that their opinion was well aligned with that of the general public through a quasi-statistical sense generated by system cues and little perceived risk associated with posting comments (Sundar, 2008; Yang, 2016). This study argues that the Korean public would click less likes and post more comments to reveal their disagreement when encountering news with a positive tone toward Park or with the main news focus of pro-Park groups. In the public comments, people would share more anger to reveal their discontent. The following hypotheses are proposed:

- *H1a*. People click on 'like' less often when a news article focuses on Park and her supporters (i.e. the protagonist of the scandal) than when one focuses on anti-Park groups.
- *H1b*. People click on 'like' less often when a news tone is positive toward Park and her supporters than when the tone is negative.
- *H2a*. People post (a) more comments and (b) express more anger in the comments when a news article focuses on Park and her supporters than when one focuses on anti-Park groups.
- *H2b*. People post (a) more comments and (b) express more anger in the comments when a news tone is positive toward Park and her supporters than when the tone is negative.

Media framing of crisis responses

Most Koreans learned about the scandal and how Park and her supporters responded to the crisis through the lens of news media. Although the media could present the organization's crisis message by delivering it word-for-word, they rarely do (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). Rather, the media actively frames the crisis messages by adding journalistic framing or interpretations to the crisis-response statement, making certain aspects of attributes more salient through different modes of presentation (Entman, 1993). As framing theory indicates, this journalistic practice of framing affects public perceptions of and attitudes toward the crisis (Scheufele, 1999).

Moreover, news media's framing practice has a tendency to reflect the public's interest and perspectives, being responsive to the cultural, political, or societal contexts that are related to the issue (Scheufele, 1999). Real-time online feedback could have an impact on how the news media frames a crisis. Scholars suggested that public opinion expressed through active online discussion tends to influence news coverage (Zhou and Moy, 2007). That is, news media tends to frame the situation in a certain way that could induce more consensus from the audience (Brüggemann, 2014). Therefore, this study

proposes to examine how the media framed the crisis-response strategies adopted by Park and how this differed from the ones Park conveyed herself through three public addresses:

- *RQ1*. How did the news media frame the crisis-response strategies used by Park, and were there any differences between Park's crisis-response strategies as framed in news media and as presented in her addresses?

Based on two dominant theories of image restoration (IRT) (Benoit, 1997) and situational crisis communication (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007), a burgeoning stream of crisis literature has been dedicated to identifying effective crisis responses that can mitigate negative public responses (Kim et al., 2009; McDonald et al., 2010). These theories provide a useful inventory of effective crisis-response strategies; ranged along a continuum, the strategies vary from defensive (e.g. denial) to accommodative (e.g. mortification; Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007).

IRT, primarily tested in political scandal crises, suggests crisis responses consist of five typologies – denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1997). The denial strategy (e.g. simple denial, shifting blame) seeks to reject the allegations of wrong-doing. Evasion of responsibility (e.g. provocation, defeasibility, good intentions) attempts to avoid or limit accountability for the crisis by stressing lack of information or control over the situation. Reducing offensiveness (e.g. minimization, transcendence) seeks to reduce the perceived threat or offensiveness of the wrongful action. Corrective action promises to fix a problem and prevent a future recurrence of the problem. Mortification involves confessing and begging for forgiveness as a form of apology. These five categories consist of specific variants, ranging from simple denial to more accommodative, such as mortification (see Benoit, 1997 for details). IRT proposes that crisis-response strategies should be utilized based on the understanding of crisis nature and the identification of relevant audiences (Benoit, 1997; Benoit and Drew, 1997). In a similar vein, SCCT offers crisis-response postures on a continuum, ranging from defensive to accommodative based on the crisis situation-response match (Coombs, 2007).

As part of considerable efforts in mapping appropriate crisis communication, many scholars have looked into public reactions to varying crisis-response strategies. In general, they have agreed that accommodative responses tend to induce more positive public responses than defensive postures especially when an accused is deemed responsible for the crisis (Kim et al., 2009; McDonald et al., 2010). This is because defensive crisis-responses tend to arouse publics' stronger discontent, dissatisfaction, and negative emotions of anger toward those responsible for the crisis (Kim and Cameron, 2011). McDonald et al. (2010) found that taking an accommodative posture led to less anger than denial, excuse, and justification strategies. Benoit and Drew (1997) suggested that corrective actions and mortification were most effective in prompting favorable reactions, while least appropriate strategies were denial, provocation, and minimization. A study analyzing crisis strategies adopted by President Bush in his speech on Hurricane Katrina (Benoit and Henson, 2009) also claimed that the use of defeasibility (i.e. evasion of responsibility) was ineffective, implying, as it did, the president's inability to manage the crisis.

Building on the previous literature of crisis-response strategies (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; McDonald et al., 2010), this study proposes that when they are exposed to media-framed defensive crisis strategies of Park, people would feel stronger discontent, express more anger, and are more motivated to post comments to further vent their anger. In contrast, when accommodative strategies are present in news articles, people would exhibit less negative responses than when they are absent:

- *H3*. When Park's defensive crisis-response strategies (i.e. denial, evasion of responsibility, and reducing offensiveness) are present in a news article, people (a) click like less often, (b) post more comments, and (c) express more anger in most-popular public comments than when such strategies are absent.
- *H4*. When Park's accommodative crisis-response strategies (i.e. corrective action and mortification/concern) are present in a news article, people (a) click like more often, (b) post fewer comments, and (c) express less anger in most-popular public comments than when such strategies are absent.

Method

Sample and coding procedure

The study conducted a quantitative content analysis. As we were concerned with collective online user behaviors, the basis of system-generated endorsement cues during the scandal, we collected from the major news portal sites – NAVER and DAUM – news stories and comment postings that were most popular among the Korean public (Reuters Institute, 2016). On the mobile view of the portal sites, users were daily shown the list of top five most-popular news stories as part of the system-generated cues. Given that a majority of Koreans accessed online news through their smartphones (Reuters Institute, 2016), the top five news articles published daily from 15 October to 25 December 2016 were collected and compiled in mid-February 2017. The time period – divided into five time frames – was selected based on important events[1] (see Figure 1). After eliminating 171 unrelated or duplicate articles, 164 news articles were randomly selected through stratified sampling with the consideration of the proportion of the days of each time frame to the entire 72 day-time frame.[2] To see how others feel about the news, more than 75 percent of Koreans read the first two or three and even up to ten of the most popular comments under each article (Kim and Oh, 2018). Taking that into consideration, we collected the top seven public comments to gauge prevailing public sentiment. This resulted in a total of 1148 most-popular public comments. The main data coding was performed between 12 and 25 March 2017 by two coders. Approximately 20 percent of the news articles ($n=33$) and public comments ($n=231$) were first coded to check intercoder reliability. The test using Kripendorff's alpha (Krippendorff, 2004) was satisfactory for all measured items, ranging from .80 to 1.00, and the remainder of the sample was coded.

Measures

The primary focus of the news articles was measured and defined as the main person or party discussed therein as part of the attributes of the scandal (Chyi and McCombs,
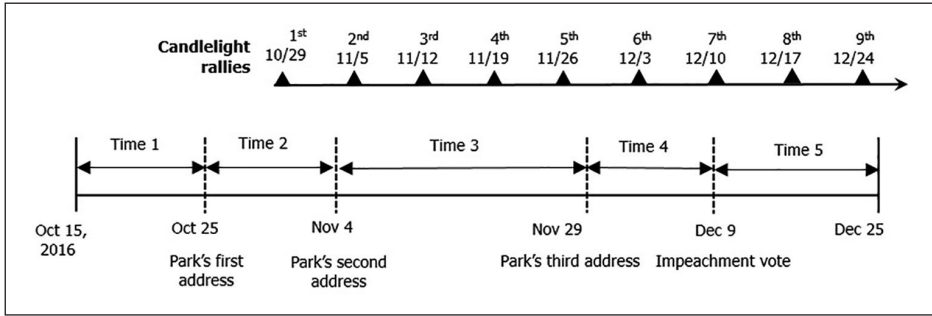
Figure 1. Time frames of the data collection period.

2004). By reading the headline and running text of the article, the coders assessed the principal person or party that was mainly discussed in the article. Three focuses were identified: (a) Main associates of the crisis (Park, Blue House, and Choi Soon-sil), (b) Park Supporters (ruling party, ParkSaMo (Association of People Who Love President Park)), and (c) Opposition Group (opposition parties, anti-Park citizens). News tone was defined as the news article's evaluative valence toward the scandal (Blaagaard, 2013) and operationalized as the degree to which the article represented Park and her supporters' views. For example, the tone was coded positive when the article was predominantly presenting Park side's stories (e.g. Park as patriotic or innocent). It was coded negative if the scandal was portrayed mainly negatively, highlighting anti-Park groups' perspectives. It was coded neutral when the article was deemed as maintaining balanced perspectives, presenting both supporters' and opponents' sides in equal proportion, supporting evidence from both sides, and using quotations that were favorable and unfavorable for both sides.

This study measured the media-framed crisis-response strategies as well as strategies adopted by Park in her three public addresses. Following Benoit's (1997) typology, five strategies were identified and coded by their presence for each article. Denial, evading responsibility, and reducing offensiveness were considered defensive strategies, and corrective action and mortification/concern were considered accommodative strategies. Denial was coded when Park simply denied the allegations or shifted the blame to others. Evading responsibility was coded when the accused attempted to evade responsibility (e.g. making excuses or claiming to have good intentions). Reducing offensiveness was coded when the accused attempted to reduce negative effects of the scandal (e.g. minimization, transcendence). Corrective action was coded when the accused claimed that they would correct the problem. Finally, mortification/concern was coded when the accused expressed mortification/concerns and/or regrets without admitting guilt.

Online communicative behaviors were coded with the numbers of likes and comments the news article received. Anger was coded as present when the public comment expressed outrage or hatred. Hope was seen as present when the comment was optimistic for the nation and predicted outcomes. The unit of analysis for the variables of news focus, tone, media-framed crisis-response strategies of Park, and the numbers of likes and comments was the whole story. For the emotion variables, it was each public

comment. For Park's three addresses, the coders counted the frequency of adopted crisis-response strategies by paragraph.

Results

Each news article in our sample received, on average, 6875 public comments (max: 33,221 and min: 2034) and 4877 likes (max: 20,980, min: 624), indicating that Koreans' preferred mode of online engagement was posting comments, not clicking likes. H1a and H1b addressed how clicking likes differs depending on the news focus and news tone. What appeared most frequently as the main focus among the news articles were Park/ Blue House/Choi-related articles (53.7%), followed by articles on the ruling party (26.8%), and then by opposition groups (19.5%). In terms of news tone, 39 percent were negative toward Park, 35.4 percent were neutral, and 25.6 percent were positive. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) results revealed significant differences in the number of likes ($p = .002$) in accordance to the news focus (see Table 1). The Tukey honestly significant difference (HSD) post hoc test revealed that news articles focusing on opposition groups received more likes than Park/Blue House/Choi ($p = .003$) and ruling parties ($p = .006$). News tone also had a significant relationship with the number of likes the article received, $p < .001$ (see Table 1). The post hoc test showed that articles that were negative toward Park received significantly more likes ($M = 6974.16$) than those that were neutral ($M = 3828.74$) or positive ($M = 3128.33$). Thus, H1a and H1b are supported.

H2a and H2b posited that people would (a) post more comments when the news focuses on and its tone is sympathetic toward Park and her supporters, (b) expressing more anger in the most-popular comments. People posted more comments when Park and her supporters were the main news focus ($p = .003$) and the news tone was sympathetic to Park ($p < .001$) than other news focuses and tones (see Table 1). The predominant emotion expressed in most-popular public comments was anger (95.2%), while hope was rarely expressed (3.7%). Chi-square tests revealed a significant difference in how anger was expressed depending on the main focus of the news, $p < .001$ (see Table 2). Anger was expressed in a greater proportion of the comments when news articles focused on Park/Blue House/Choi (98.4%) and the ruling party (97.1%) than when the news focus was on opposition groups (83.9%). However, hope was rarely expressed when articles focused on Park/Blue House/Choi (1.8%) or ruling party (.3%), whereas hope was expressed in a greater proportion when news focused on opposition groups (13.4%), $p < .0001$. There was a significant difference in how anger was expressed in most-popular comments depending on the tone of articles, $\chi^2(2) = 28.50$, $p < .001$ (see Table 2). When news articles were sympathetic toward Park, anger was expressed in all the ensuing comments (100%, $n = 294$). When articles were neutral or negative toward Park, anger was expressed in smaller proportions (see Table 2). Thus, H2a and H2b are supported.

Clear inverse relationships were observed between online communicative behaviors of likes and comments for both news focus and tone. When the news focus was on Park and her supporters, people posted more comments, expressed more anger in the most-popular comments but clicked like less often. When the news tone was positive of Park, more comments were posted, and more anger was expressed. In contrast, when the news tone was negative of Park, people clicked like more often (see Figure 2).

Table 1. News characteristics and publics' online communicative behaviors.

News characteristics		Likes Mean (SD)	Comments Mean (SD)
News focus			
Park/BH/Choi	53.7% (n=88)	4358.22 (3707.08)	6813.55 (4594.66)
RP/Supporters	26.8% (n=44)	4242.34 (3316.10)	8368.11 (4674.81)
Opposing Group	19.5% (n=32)	7175.53 (5646.86)	4991.78 (1624.15)
		$F(2161)=6.38**$	$F(2161)=5.97**$
News tone			
Positive	25.6% (n=42)	3128.33 (2565.20)	8670.43 (4975.87)
Neutral	35.4% (n=58)	3828.74 (3161.90)	7068.33 (4759.69)
Negative	39% (n=64)	6974.16 (4966.75)	5521.95 (2842.08)
		$F(2161)=15.928***$	$F(2161)=7.283***$

SD: standard deviation; BH: Blue House; RP: ruling party.
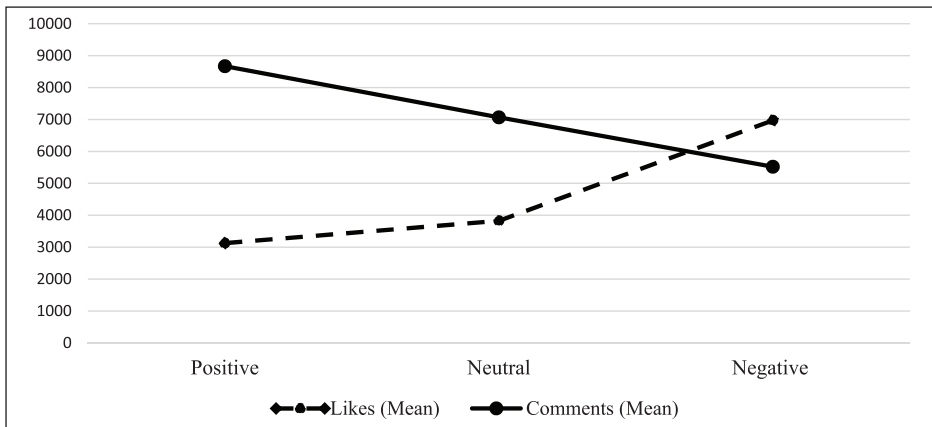$**p<.01$, $***p<.001$.

Figure 2. Public likes and comments by news tone toward Park Scandal

RQ1 asked how news media framed Park's crisis-response strategies and if there were any differences between media framing of and Park's adoption of crisis-response strategies. The denial strategy appeared most often in news articles during Time 1 (45.8%, $n=11$). After Time 1, Park made her first public address (105 words in length). She used evasion of responsibility (e.g. good intention), reducing offensiveness (e.g. minimization), and mortification/concern strategies each one time in her address. After her first address, however, during Time 2, the news media most often selectively reported her attempt at minimization (i.e. reducing offensiveness) (35.7%, $n=10$), followed by mortification/concern (25%, $n=7$), and then by evasion of responsibility (17.9 %, $n=5$). In her second address (474 words), Park most often

Table 2. News characteristics and emotions in public comments.

	Emotions	
	Anger $n = 1093$ (95.2%)	Hope/Joy $n = 42$ (3.7%)
News Focus		
Park/Blue House/Choi	606 (98.4%)	11 (1.8%)
Ruling party	299 (97.1%)	1 (.3%)
Opposing groups	188 (83.9%)	30 (11.3%)
	$\chi^2(2) = 78.40$***	$\chi^2(2) = 76.06$***
News Tone		
Positive	294 (100%)	1 (.3%)
Neutral	389 (95.8%)	5 (1.2%)
Negative	410 (91.5%)	36 (8%)
	$\chi^2(2) = 28.50$***	$\chi^2(2) = 40.32$***

***$p < .001$.

adopted the mortification/concern strategy (five times), expressing grief without admitting guilt. She used the evasion of responsibility second most (three times), mentioning that her intention was good or Choi's illegal actions were without her knowledge (i.e. defeasibility). However, during Time 3, news media did not cover these two strategies most often (i.e. mortification/concern: 6%, $n = 3$, evasion of responsibility: 22%, $n = 11$). Rather, the news most often covered reducing offensiveness (34%, $n = 17$) and denial (32%, $n = 16$) strategies. Park rarely adopted the simple denial strategy in her second address, yet during Time 3, it was often framed by the news media (denial: 32%, $n = 16$).

In her third/last address (235 words), Park most frequently used mortification/concern and reducing offensiveness strategies (both five times). Yet in Time 4, the mortification/concern strategy was covered by only 7.7% ($n = 2$) of the articles ($n = 26$). Instead, during this time, the news media preferred to cover reducing offensiveness (34.6%, $n = 9$) and corrective action (23.1%, $n = 6$). After the impeachment vote in Time 5, denial (38.9%, $n = 14$), evasion of responsibility (36.1%, $n = 13$), and reduction of offensiveness strategies (36.1%, $n = 13$) appeared equally often in news articles, while corrective action and mortification/concern strategies did not appear in Time 5.

Overall, when organized by the defensive-accommodative classification, the news media more often framed defensive strategies ($n = 82$, 50%) than accommodative ones ($n = 26$, 15.8%). Throughout her addresses, however, Park adopted accommodative strategies (14 times) slightly more often than she did defensive ones (11 times). To examine if there was any systematic possibility that news containing certain strategies did not gain popularity from the public to be included in our sample, we compared the number of likes and comments between news articles with defensive and accommodative strategies. No clear differences emerged between them in terms of the number of likes (defensive: $M = 4419.56$; accommodative: $M = 4206.85$) and comments (defensive, $M = 7948.48$; accommodative, $M = 8799.31$).

H3a–c posited more negative public responses when Park's defensive crisis-response strategies were present in an article than when they were absent, whereas H4a–c proposed more positive public responses when accommodative strategies were present in an article than when such strategies were absent. Defensive crisis-response strategies were not related to the number of likes ($p=.163$), but significantly stimulated more online comment posting. When defensive strategies were present, more comments were posted ($M=5101.45$, $SD=563.36$) than when they were absent ($M=3089.44$, $SD=341.17$), $t=-3.26$, $p=.001$. Most-popular public comments in the presence of media-framed defensive strategies contained much more anger, $\chi^2(1)=8.42$, $p=.004$. Thus, H3b and H3c related to comments and anger are supported, while H3a for likes is not.

As to H4a–c, contradictory to our predictions, the presence of media-framed accommodative strategies revealed a similar pattern to defensive strategies, not supporting our hypotheses. When media-framed accommodative strategies were present, people posted more comments ($M=8799.31$) than when they were absent ($M=6512.64$, $t=-2.50$, $p=.01$), and the most-popular public comments under such articles contained more anger ($\chi^2(1)=10.88$, $p=.001$), while no difference was revealed in public likes.

Discussion

Through the investigation of collective online user behaviors during the Park scandal, this study delineates how people participated in expressing their political stances while consuming related online news. When the news focus was on Park and her supporters and its tone sympathetic, publics clearly exhibited more active and explicit participatory engagement through posting more comments than when the tone was negative toward Park or the focus was on anti-Park groups. In the most-popular public comments under such news stories, publics clearly revealed their disapproval by disproportionately expressing more anger. In a similar vein, public approval or recommendation of the news stories through clicking likes significantly decreased when Park and her supporters were the focus of the news and the news tone was sympathetic toward them.

This implies that people tend to engage online more actively by posting comments when in disagreement with the view or tone of the online news (Lane et al., 2017; Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015). That is, people tend to be more vocal to counter-attitudinal news by posting more comments. This is in line with previous research that suggests people post more comments when reading news with which they more strongly disagree (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2015). The increased number of public comments under counter-attitudinal news stories might also be explained by publics' consensus heuristics triggered by most-popular comments of other users (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Sundar, 2008). As they feel less at risk, people may join in posting comments. Indeed, they can see from the most-popular comments that counter-attitudinal news stories elicited a greater proportion of anger. They thus receive heuristic cues that their opinions are in compliance with the majority views (Walther and Jang, 2012; Yang, 2016). This also may have contributed to the increased number of comments under counter-attitudinal news.

According to exemplification theory (Zillmann and Brosius, 2012), statistics such as aggregated approval ratings of likes could be comparatively insignificant to news readers' perceptions of public opinion as it is less clear than illustrative exemplars such as

comments (Waddell, 2017). It could be because aggregated likes could bear several different meanings: public recommendation of the news article for its information usefulness (e.g. others need to read this news, so I recommend it) or endorsement of the article's view (i.e. agreeing with its stance). As such, the meaning of likes is less specific and thus be less influential than vivid exemplars of public comments on readers' evaluation of the news article (Winter et al., 2015). Previous research has also suggested that when news users are exposed to online comments that are more incongruent with the news stance, they tend to infer that public opinion is more disparate from the news stance and to consider the impact of the news on others as smaller (Lee and Jang, 2010). Given this, the exposure to most-popular public comments by other users that contained excessive anger against Park may have lowered the perceived credibility of pro-Park news and affected the perceived climate of public opinion, rendering a perception of public opinion being generally against pro-Park news (Waddell, 2017). This may further increase other users' active participation in posting more comments to pro-Park news, resulting in the increased number of comments under such stories. These results are also in line with previous research on the role of emotions in crisis, confirming that people who feel anger are more active in negative communication with others and exerting negative sentiment toward the crisis-related parties (Grappi and Romani, 2015).

Our study also suggests that the Korean public, regardless of varying news tones or focuses, exhibited a more active mode of online engagement – posting comments. Compared to clicking likes, this requires higher levels of commitment, effort, and cognitive information processing (Kleut et al., 2018). This implies that the Korean public was willing to invest higher cognitive processing in consuming news on the scandal (Ksiazek et al., 2016) and to share their opinion more actively with other news readers.

As to the media framing of Park's crisis-responses, our study identified that news media actively intervened through framing more defensive strategies of Park than accommodative ones and did not merely convey to the public the crisis-responses presented by Park (Brüggemann, 2014). Given that defensive strategies induce stronger public anger and blame when the accused is deemed responsible (Benoit, 1997; Kim and Cameron, 2011), it seems that news media tended to frame Park's crisis-responses more negatively by framing more defensive strategies. The potential reason for such active media framing may be related to the political contexts of, experts' views on, and the general public's stance toward the crisis (Scheufele, 1999; Zhou and Moy, 2007). This may suggest that the news media's frame-setting of crisis responses was responsive to the public's points of view on the Park scandal (Won, 2016). That is, Park's accommodative strategies were 'too little too late'. They were insufficient to reverse the public call for impeachment (Park and Kim, 2016).

In addition, our study identifies some intriguing findings related to public reactions to media-framed crisis responses. The presence of media-framed defensive strategies certainly induced, as expected, more negative public responses. Nonetheless, media-framed accommodative strategies also resulted in more anger and increased public comments. This is somewhat contradictory to previous crisis studies that have substantially recommended the adoption of accommodative strategies over defensive ones in a preventable crisis where the locus of the crisis is internal (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; McDonald et al., 2010). This inconsistency may be explained by several aspects.

First, there could be many other aspects of the news articles that affected active public engagement such as news stance and focus. These other news characteristics might offset the potential relationships media-framed crisis-responses could have with public reactions.

Another potential explanation could be related to public perception of the responsible parties' capacity to deliver a desirable crisis outcome (Bandura, 2001). According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), people assess, when facing uncertain situations such as a crisis, whether desirable outcomes can be achieved and if so, who is capable of producing them. When people perceive those responsible for a crisis cannot deliver, they tend to exert outcome control either collectively or by relying on other powerful proxy agents such as government or media (Bandura, 2001; Skinner, 1996). Since the major culprit of the Park scandal was the government itself, Koreans may try to exert crisis outcome control either collectively (i.e. collective control) or rely more on media as proxy control (Skinner, 1996). This implies that when people start to exert outcome control either through collective or proxy control based on the assessment of the crisis protagonist's incapability of achieving desirable outcomes (Bandura, 2001; Skinner, 1996), the crisis-response strategies largely endorsed by the literature (e.g. Coombs, 2007) may no longer be effective in mitigating negative public responses. This possibility suggests that crisis communication research may also consider public assessments of who can and has control over desirable crisis outcomes when considering effective crisis-response strategies, not just public assessments of crisis causes. Given existing crisis research such as SCCT has focused on public attributions of crisis causes when matching crisis-response strategies (Coombs, 2007), adopting perceived locus of crisis-outcome control from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) could extend our understanding of public reactions to varying crisis-responses.

Although this study provides useful implications, the content-analysis method adopted is limited in its detection of causality. Researchers should cautiously interpret the relationships discovered herein. The study adopted the sample of most-popular news stories and most-liked public comments. This can be useful in examining collective user behaviors, but also has a limitation in generalizing the findings to all other online news stories and public comments. In addition, the findings could be subject to the Korean contexts of online news consumption and system-generated cues on portal sites. Thus, they should be interpreted with caution when applied to other contexts where news consumption patterns and characteristics are largely different. All in all, this study offers significant insights into how digital media and news consumption online have enabled the active participation of the public in online political engagement (Shah et al., 2017). The public can indeed exert collective power by explicitly sharing their political stance in public or, as they consume news online, by supporting other fellow citizens' opinions. They do so in times of crisis by actively sharing their negative sentiments against counter-attitudinal news media and crisis-relevant parties.

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Notes

1. These include the following: student protests against preferential treatment of Choi Soon-sil's daughter which led to the initial investigation (15 October 2016: starting date), President Park's three national addresses (25 October, 4 November, and 29 November 2016), the National Assembly's impeachment vote (9 December 2016), and the time offline protests started to subside (25 December 2016: ending date).
2. For example, Time frame 1 lasted 10 days, making up 13.88 percent of the entire 72-day time frame. Thus, we randomly collected approximately 14 percent of 164 articles ($n=24$) from Time 1.

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