



# How Perceived Costs and Benefits of Initial Social Media Participation Affect Subsequent Community-Based Participation

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**Abstract** Focusing on the low-cost nature of social media participation, previous studies have described social media as providing opportunities for nonprofit organizations to gain support for their campaigns, such as asking to click a button. However, the question remains whether and how social media participation subsequently encourages community-based (offline) participation. Extending previous studies' focus on the actual cost of social media participation, we examine how *perceived costs* and *benefits* of social media participation motivate individuals to participate in community-based participation. Our analysis of two-way between-subjects ANCOVA demonstrated that the perceived benefits of initial social media participation, rather than its actual or perceived costs, drive individuals to identify with the issue and engage in subsequent community-based participation. This finding suggests that the meaning of social media participation does not lie in whether it allows for low-cost actions, but in how individuals perceive and appreciate the benefits from their actions and identify with the issue.

**Keywords** Social media participation · Subsequent community-based participation · Perceived costs and benefits · Clicktivism · Issue identification

## Introduction

Social media provide opportunities as well as pose challenges for nonprofit organizations (NPOs). Previous studies have addressed that social media makes it easy for NPOs to distribute organizational information and campaigns to a broad audience and gain support from them (Guo and Saxton 2018; Lam and Nie 2019). They explained that participation activities on social media usually do not cost much time or effort, so many NPOs ask their audience to “like” or “share” organizational postings.

However, NPOs also face difficulties in transforming social media-based participation (social media participation, hereafter) into deeper engagement of community-based activities in the offline environment.<sup>1</sup> Researchers have pointed out that only a few individuals who participate on social media take any further action, a phenomenon critically labeled clicktivism, referring to the low cost of clicking a button as an act of support (Kristofferson et al. 2014; Morozov 2011). Despite the low-cost nature of social media participation discussed in previous studies, individuals may perceive the costs of social media participation differently and decide to participate by weighing not only the costs but also the benefits of their participation

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<sup>1</sup> Previous research on clicktivism tends to consider offline participation to be deeper engagement than social media participation. However, offline participation activities may vary, ranging from signing petition to sit-in protests. Some activities such as mass demonstrations take place in the offline environment, but may initiate in networking among individuals in the social media environment. Acknowledging the broad range and continuum of offline participation activities and preventing the binary distinction between offline and online participation, we use “community-based participation,” instead of the broader term, “offline participation” to refer to the offline activity, specifically in this study, the activity of folding flyers into envelopes, which follows the initial social media participation.

(Brunsting and Postmes 2002; Klandermans 1997; Klandermans and Oegema 1987). Such rational considerations of costs and benefits may influence whether individuals extend their social media participation to the subsequent community-based participation.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this study is to investigate the mechanism linking social media participation and subsequent community-based participation. Extending previous studies' focus on the actual cost of social media participation, we examine how perceived costs and benefits of the initial social media participation lead to subsequent community-based activities. Additionally, we suggest issue identification as a mediating process under which perceived costs and benefits of initial social media participation extend to subsequent community-based participation.

This study makes four contributions to scholarship on the nonprofit sector. First, it restructures the theoretical discussion on the meaning and mechanism of social media participation for NPOs. Second, it reveals an interesting association between social media and community-based participation activities. Third, it enriches the research on identification with social issues in the nonprofit sector. Finally, it provides implications for practitioners in the nonprofit field.

## Actual Costs and Perceived Costs of Social Media Participation

Previous studies have mostly focused on the low-cost nature of social media participation as one of the biggest differences from traditional participation (Kristofferson et al. 2014; Lee and Hsieh 2013; Nekmat et al. 2015; Zorn et al. 2013). For instance, these studies explained that clicking a “like” button for an NPO’s campaign, a common social media participation activity, does not require much time and effort in comparison with community-based participation such as attending public demonstrations for NPOs. The low-*actual* cost of social media participation has been the focus when discussing the meaning of social media participation.

However, studies on participation in social movement and protests have posited that it is individuals’ *perception* of costs, not the actual costs, that determines their participation (Brunsting and Postmes 2002; Klandermans 1997; Klandermans and Oegema 1987). These studies have operationalized the costs of participation as individuals’ perception of the amount of sacrifice of free time or risk of

violence (e.g., police violence, and attacks from counter-protesters) participation entails. For instance, when individuals perceived that they had to sacrifice much of their free time and risk many disturbances or violence due to their participation activities, they were less likely to participate. Those who participated in these activities perceived giving up a free Saturday and risking violence as lower cost than nonparticipants (Klandermans and Oegema 1987). A similar pattern occurs when it comes to individuals’ decision whether to take part in social media or community-based activities; a study found that individuals were more likely to participate in social media activities than community-based activities because they perceived that social media participation costs less (Nekmat et al. 2015).

The studies discussed above indicate that how individuals *perceive* the costs of participation activities may play a significant role in determining their participation. Accordingly, focusing only on the low *actual* cost of social media participation may not reveal how and why individuals engage in the subsequent participation. Regardless of the actual cost of the initial social media participation, each participant in social media activities may perceive the costs of their participation differently. For instance, some individuals may perceive the act of clicking a “like” button as a quick and easy activity, whereas others may regard it as burdensome. As such, this study examines whether the perceived costs may play a more important role in determining the subsequent participation than the actual costs.

The Expectancy Value Theory indicated that the perceived costs of participation in social movements or protests may negatively affect the decision to participate (Brunsting and Postmes 2002; Klandermans 1997; Klandermans and Oegema 1987). The theory explained that individuals decide to engage in participation based on their rational decision of weighing the costs and benefits of the participation. The costs act as barriers to participation in social movements or protests, whereas the benefits act as incentives.

However, research has provided conflicting arguments on the effect of the cost of social media participation on subsequent community-based participation. Some studies posit that low costs of social media participation may serve to raise community-based participation by inviting in individuals who may otherwise never engage, whereas other studies suggest that low costs can cause low commitment to the issue and to further participation (Lee and Hsieh 2013; Nekmat et al. 2015). In order to provide an explanation for these conflicting arguments, studies are needed to distinguish perceived and actual costs, or the cost levels of different participation activities, and provide empirical evidence as to whether and how costs play a role

<sup>2</sup> When individuals participate in a social media activity, which we refer to as “initial” social media participation in this paper, their participation may influence their participation in the future, which we refer to as “subsequent” participation.

in linking social media participation and community-based participation.

A few empirical studies provide useful insights in examining the effect of perceived costs of the initial participation on the subsequent community-based participation. For instance, previous research found that participants in initial social media activities, such as clicking a “like” button, signing an online petition, or sharing participation information, are more likely to decrease subsequent community-based participation than are nonparticipants (Schumann and Klein 2015). On the other hand, participants in other activities, such as participating in online discussions, of which more people may perceive the costs as higher than the above activities, are more likely to increase subsequent community-based participation than are nonparticipants (Conroy et al. 2012; Valenzuela et al. 2010). Although these studies have not directly compared different levels of perceived costs in participation activities, the results together suggest that initial social media activities with high costs may have a more positive influence on subsequent community-based participation than those with low perceived costs.

Mullen and Monin’s (2016) meta-analytic review on consistency of social behaviors also provides an explanation for previous findings of positive associations between the high perceived costs of initial participation and the subsequent participation. Individuals have a strong drive to maintain their values, attitudes, and behaviors consistently (Burger 1999; Festinger 1954; Gawronski and Strack 2012). As such, when individuals perceive higher costs of commitment in their initial social behavior, they are more likely to put more efforts toward the goal by participating in the subsequent behavior (Fishbach et al. 2009, 2014; Susewind and Hoelzl 2014). In this way, they can maintain their values, attitudes, and behaviors consistently toward their goal. For instance, when individuals perceive greater commitment to their job by focusing on tasks they have completed at work, they tend to stay longer in the office to complete additional tasks; individuals who are asked to focus on what they have not achieved would infer lower commitment to their job and leave earlier that day (Fishbach et al. 2009). Accordingly, the current study assumes that perception of higher costs of initial social media participation may lead individuals to infer greater commitment to participation activities and to give more efforts toward goal achievement and self-consistency through the subsequent community-based participation. Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

**H1** The perceived costs of initial social media participation positively influence subsequent community-based participation.

Additionally, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978; Turner and Onorato 1999) may explain how the perceived costs of social media activities affect subsequent community-based participation. This theory posits that individuals internalize many aspects of their social world and incorporate them into their social identities to different degrees in order to define themselves. Gneezy et al. (2012) explained that participation in a high-cost prosocial behavior supports higher identification with a prosocial identity because it gives a stronger signal of such identity than a low-cost one and increases future participation. In their experiment, those who made a costly donation, rather than a costless donation, reported higher prosocial identity; they also behaved more honestly than their counterparts in the subsequent condition of a sender-receiver game where they could deceive to receive more money.

Previous studies also demonstrate that a higher level of identity related to participation motivates participants more strongly to maintain their values and behaviors consistently and increase engagement in subsequent participation (Garvey and Bolton 2017; Mullen and Monin 2016). For example, Garvey and Bolton (2017) found that those who identified more with environmental issues were more likely to participate in the subsequent environmentally responsible behavior after an experimental treatment of buying an eco-product. These studies together suggest that when individuals perceive higher costs from their social media participation, they may become more likely to identify with the identity related to the participation (e.g., identification with the issue) and participate in the subsequent activity. Low-cost social media activities, on the other hand, may not encourage individuals to identify with the relevant identity strongly enough to participate in subsequent community-based participation. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H1-1** The perceived costs of initial social media participation positively influence subsequent community-based participation by increasing identification with the issue.

## Benefits of Social Media Participation

Previous studies have regarded benefits of social media participation as another important difference from community-based participation, in addition to the costs. Specifically, those who criticize social media participation have argued that social media participation cannot alone generate benefits comparable to community-based participation such as a changed policy or new regime (Kristofferson et al. 2014; Nekmat et al. 2015). The low benefits of social media participation have been addressed as another reason for low value of clicktivism.

Based on the Expectancy Value Theory, the perceived benefits of a participation activity can act as an incentive to participation (Klandermans and Oegema 1987; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). The theory explained that those who participate were more likely to have expectations that their activities can generate social, societal, or individual benefits than nonparticipants (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). In addition, if participants thought about such benefits, they were likely to have future intentions to carry out the participation behaviors (Hornsey et al. 2006; van Zomeren et al. 2012).

Despite the possible role of perceived benefits in determining the subsequent participation, few studies have developed concrete definitions of the perceived benefits of participation. In order to examine its role, this study draws on previous research that may suggest a nuanced conceptualization of the perceived benefits of participation. First, previous studies addressed that *perceived effectiveness* reflects participants' expected benefits from their participation. The Expectancy Value Theory considered the expectations about the effectiveness of the participation as a benefit of it that may incentivize participation (Brunsting and Postmes 2002). Hornsey et al. (2006) conceptualized such effectiveness of participation in four dimensions and addressed that individuals regard these dimensions as benefits achieved from their participation: (1) influencing the opponents or groups that the activity is directed at (e.g., policy makers), (2) influencing third parties (e.g., public opinion), (3) building an oppositional movement, and (4) expressing values. They found that all the criteria except for the first were significantly related to individuals' intentions to participate in collective action. Second, previous studies explained that *perceived efficacy* of participants' activity may also reflect the participants' expected benefits from their participation. Perceived efficacy refers to the evaluation as to whether or not one's own participation can create an influence on the social issue (van Zomeren et al. 2008; Wilkins et al. 2019). Indeed, research found that high perceived efficacy led to greater beliefs about the benefits of one's own participation and increased one's participation (Wilkins et al. 2019).

Taken together, these studies imply that rational considerations of whether an action benefits the self or society translates into future participation. However, it is still unclear whether individuals perceive certain benefits from social media participation and if so, how perceived benefits of initial social media participation can motivate the subsequent community-based participation. Some researchers maintain pessimistic views about social media participation, arguing that clicking a button cannot alone generate benefits comparable to community-based activities such as a changed policy or new regime (Kristofferson et al. 2014; Nekmat et al. 2015). Consistent with this view, Schumann

and Klein (2015) found from their experiments that participating in the initial social media activity of writing a supportive comment for a cause reduced subsequent joining of a mass demonstration for the same cause. They found that individuals considered the initial social media participation to be a substantial contribution to the success of the cause it addressed and therefore did not consider further contribution necessary.

On the contrary, a recent study argues that this clicktivism hypothesis may undervalue the capacity of social media participation to facilitate community-based participation (Wilkins et al. 2019). Wilkins et al. (2019) suggests that social media action can translate into community-based participation under the right circumstances. For instance, individuals who participate in a social media action are willing to participate further when they perceive the initial participation as effective (Vaccari et al. 2015; Wilkins et al. 2019). Previous studies also explained that the perceived efficacy of prior participation can facilitate subsequent action (van Zomeren et al. 2013) as it increases individuals' perception of their ability to generate change (Drury and Reicher 2005).

Accordingly, the present study operationalizes perceived benefits, reflecting upon various criteria of evaluating efficacy and effectiveness, and examines whether and how perceived benefits of initial social media participation subsequently encourage community-based participation. Therefore, this paper hypothesizes:

**H2** The perceived benefits of initial social media participation positively influence subsequent community-based participation.

In addition, the present study seeks to address the psychological process under which the perceived benefits of social media participation facilitate community-based participation. Research on Social Identity Theory provides insight into this link. First, individuals' beliefs about the efficacy of their participation behavior can contribute to increasing their identification with the focal issue of participation (Alberici and Milesi 2016; Postmes 2007); individuals who have high expectations for what they can achieve from their participation give more meaning to their identity related to the issue and internalize the relevant identity more strongly. Second, individuals have the basic motivation to maintain their identity, especially an identity they see as important (Hogg et al. 1995; Turner and Onorato 1999). A higher level of identity related to participation may motivate participants to maintain their identity by participating in the subsequent activity (Garvey and Bolton 2017; Mullen and Monin 2016). Therefore, this paper hypothesizes:

**H2-1** The perceived benefits of initial social media participation positively influence subsequent community-based participation by increasing identification with the issue.

## Methods

### Sample

The sample consisted of general panel data obtained from Insight Korea, a professional research firm, in April 2018. Participants lived in Seoul, South Korea and knew how to use KakaoTalk, the most popular social networking service in the country, which 95% of Korean social media users use (Digital Times 2016). These qualifications controlled for the influence of environmental and social surroundings. A total of 100 individuals were qualified to participate (see Table 1 for demographics).

### Procedure

In this experiment, participants first answered questions about how much they identified with an environmental issue (pre-issue identification). They then read an online message describing an online petition initiated by an environmental NPO. Participants were informed that the online petition called for the government to eliminate a “Sunset Regulation of Planned Urban Facilities” that would be implemented in July 2020. This regulation aims to withdraw all legal protection of urban parks (see “Appendix 1” for the full message). We chose an environmental issue for our study, a relatively general issue which individuals may have opinions about, as in a previous study (Nekmat et al. 2015).

Participants were then randomly assigned to two conditions. In the high-actual cost condition, 50 participants

read a message including a link to the online petition and a request to share it with 10 people individually via KakaoTalk. In the low-actual cost condition, the other 50 were asked to share the same message via KakaoTalk with only one person. Participants in both conditions had to upload captured screenshots to prove they had completed the sharing activities. They then reported the perceived costs and benefits of their social media activity and post-issue identification in a post-questionnaire.

Participants then read another message inviting them to volunteer to fold flyers into envelopes in order to distribute the online petition campaign materials offline. They were told that the research company would contact those who agreed to participate and send them the flyers and asked how many flyers they would fold.

Many NPOs ask individuals to share information about their campaigns based on the belief that the actual cost of this strategy is low and that this strategy may engage many individuals who only have to click a button (Guo and Saxton 2018; Ihm 2019; Lam and Nie 2019; Zhou and Pan 2016). We chose this social media activity—sharing information to the participants’ networks on social media about NPOs’ campaigns and asking for online support—in order to examine the influence of NPOs’ common social media strategy on subsequent community-based participation.

## Measures

### *Social Media Participation*

Perceived costs of social media participation were measured by adopting an existing 5-point Likert scale used in community-based participation contexts (e.g., sacrifice of free time, risk of violence, and participation of others, Klandermans and Oegema 1987,  $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = .73$ ,  $\alpha = .72$ , see “Appendix 2” for full items of every scale used in this study). For perceived benefits of social media participation, no measure exists, so we created a 5-point Likert scale adapted from an effectiveness scale for participation behavior (Hornsey et al. 2006), and a participatory efficacy scale (van Zomeren et al. 2012) to include various aspects of benefits (e.g., generating social changes by influencing public opinion and policy makers, expressing one’s values, Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Postmes 2007,  $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = .47$ ,  $\alpha = .85$ ). Two-factor models were tested on perceived costs and benefits of social media participation and reached an acceptable fit of reflecting different constructs:  $\chi^2(34) = 49.19$ ,  $CMIN/df = 1.45$ ,  $CFI = .97$ ,  $TLI = .96$ ,  $RMSEA = .07$ .

Using an “egen” function (StataCorp 2015), we classified the participants into two groups of low (range: 1–2.2,  $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = .35$ ,  $n = 49$ ) and high perceived costs

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of the participants

Demographic variables	Mean (SD) (%)
Age	32.23 (10.13)
Gender	
Male	49%
Female	51%
Education	
High school graduate	4%
Some college	13%
College graduate	75%
Advanced degree (e.g., MA, PhD)	8%
Monthly household income	\$3876.31 (1345.57)

(range: 2.4–4.2,  $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = .40$ ,  $n = 51$ ). There was a significant difference between the two groups ( $t(98) = -12.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We also classified the participants into two groups of low (range: 2.75–3.88,  $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .34$ ,  $n = 50$ ) and high perceived benefits (range: 3.88–5,  $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = .29$ ,  $n = 50$ ). There was a significant difference between the two groups ( $t(98) = -10.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Community-Based Participation

After the online experiment, participants were asked if they were willing to volunteer to fold flyers into envelopes for the NPO in order to distribute the online petition campaign materials offline. Respondents first indicated if they would fold flyers for the NPO. If yes, they reported the number of flyers they were willing to fold ( $M = 10.05$ ,  $SD = 35.42$ ).

### Issue Identification

Issue identification measures evaluated the degree of individuals identifying with the environmental issue before and after social media participation. Both pre-issue ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = .74$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ) and post-issue identification ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = .43$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ) were measured using the modified version of a 5-point Likert scale on organizational identification (Brown et al. 1986) by changing the term “organization” to “protecting the environment” (e.g., “Participating in activities to support an environmental issue is an important part of who I am”).

### Analysis

We first conducted a one-way ANOVA to examine whether the two conditions of low- and high-*actual* costs have different influences on the number of flyers the participants wanted to fold for the NPO offline. We then conducted a two-way ANCOVA to examine the role of *perceived* costs and benefits in increasing the subsequent community-based participation, controlling for the effect of the actual costs (H1, and H2).

For H1-1 and H2-1, we first conducted a two-way ANCOVA to examine whether the perceived costs and benefits positively influence individuals to identify with the environmental issue after they engage in the initial social media participation (i.e., post-issue identification). We then conducted a regression analysis to examine whether the post-issue identification increases the subsequent community-based participation. We controlled for the actual costs and pre-issue identification for both analyses. We also tested the significance of mediated relationships proposed in H1-1 and H2-1 using MPLus8.

## Results

This study first examined the role of the perceived costs of the initial social media participation in determining the subsequent community-based participation, in comparison with the actual costs. The results of a one-way ANOVA showed no significant difference between participants in the high- and low-actual cost conditions in terms of the number of flyers they wanted to fold for community-based participation. Therefore, the actual costs of social media participation did not influence the community-based participation. This result directs attention to the role of perceived costs on the subsequent community-based participation.

H1 and H2 hypothesized that perceived costs and benefits of initial social media participation increase subsequent community-based participation. Controlling for the effect of the actual costs, a two-way ANCOVA showed that there was no significant difference between the number of flyers participants wanted to fold between the groups with low and high perceived costs. Thus, H1 was not supported. However, the group with high perceived benefits wanted to fold a significantly greater number of flyers ( $M = 14.86$ ,  $SD = 45.07$ ) than the group with low perceived benefits ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 8.70$ ,  $F(1,95) = 5.80$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ ). Thus, H2 was supported. There was no significant interaction between perceived costs and benefits.

We conducted ANCOVA and a regression analysis to test H1-1 and H2-1, controlling for the actual costs and pre-issue identification. H1-1 predicted that perceived costs of initial social media participation positively influence subsequent community-based participation by increasing identification with the issue addressed in the petition individuals shared. The results from ANCOVA showed no significant difference in post-issue identification between the groups of high and low perceived costs. Therefore, H1-1 was not supported.

H2-1 predicted that perceived benefits of initial social media participation positively influence subsequent community-based participation by increasing identification with the participating issue. The results from ANCOVA indicated a significant difference in post-issue identification between the groups with low ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = .41$ ) and high perceived benefits ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = .36$ ,  $F(1,94) = 5.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ ). The regression analysis showed a positive relationship between post-issue identification and community-based participation. Individuals wanted to fold a greater number of flyers when their post-issue identification was higher ( $B = .37$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $F(2,97) = 7.36$ ,  $R^2 = .13$ ). Therefore, H2-1 was supported.

**Table 2** Mediation tests for H1-1 and H2-1

Path	<i>B</i>	SE	95% LLCI	95% ULCI
<b>Direct effect</b>				
Costs of social media participation → post-issue identification	-.10	.08	-.23	.02
Costs of social media participation → community-based participation	.01	.11	-.16	.19
Benefits of social media participation → post-issue identification	.62	.06	.53	.71
Benefits of social media participation → community-based participation	.11	.19	.20	.42
Post-issue identification → community-based participation	.21	.09	.05	.36
<b>Indirect effect</b>				
Costs of social media participation → post-issue identification → community-based participation	-.02	.02 <sup>a</sup>	-.05 <sup>b</sup>	.01 <sup>b</sup>
Benefits of social media participation → post-issue identification → community-based participation	.13	.06 <sup>a</sup>	.03 <sup>b</sup>	.23 <sup>b</sup>

*n* = 100. Number of bootstrap samples = 5000

<sup>a</sup>Bootstrapped standard error

<sup>b</sup>Bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. If the 95% confidence interval for an indirect path does not include 0, there is evidence of significant mediation

Using MPlus8 (see Table 2 for mediation results), we tested the significance of mediated relationships proposed in H1-1 and H2-1. Actual cost manipulation and pre-issue identification were also included as controlled covariates. A bootstrapping method was used with 5000 possible samples, which provides a sample-based estimate of the indirect effect and biased corrected confidence intervals. If the 95% confidence interval for an indirect path does not contain 0, there is evidence of a significant indirect path. The results showed that the indirect path proposed in H-1 was not significant. The indirect path proposed in H2-1 was supported. The confidence intervals for an indirect path between perceived benefits and the number of flyers to fold through post-issue identification did not contain 0. This result means that post-issue identification significantly mediated the relationship between perceived benefits of social media participation and community-based participation ( $B = .13$ , 95% CI = .03 to .23).

## Discussion

Previous research has considered whether social media participation facilitates or inhibits subsequent community-based participation. The present study seeks to address this question in two ways. First, we conducted experiments to provide empirical evidence for causal effects of social media participation on subsequent community-based participation. Second, we examined how individuals' subjective experiences of social media participation affect their decision to subsequently participate in community-based activities by focusing on psychological effects of social media participation (i.e., perceived costs and benefits).

The results from H1 suggest that both actual and perceived costs of initial social media participation might not affect subsequent community-based participation. We differentiated the actual and perceived costs of social media participation to enrich the theoretical discussions of the costs of participation, but both types of costs did not determine whether the initial social media participation extends to community-based participation. The results from H2 suggest that perceived benefits of social media participation are the significant positive predictor of the subsequent community-based participation.

These results do not correspond with previous research which regarded costs as barriers to participation (Brunsting and Postmes 2002; Klandermans 1997; Klandermans and Oegema 1987) or commitment leading to more subsequent participation (Mullen and Monin 2016). This inconsistency may result from the characteristics of social media participation. Because social media participation does not often extend to community-based participation, many individuals may question the actual impact of social media participation. Ensuring individuals of the benefits of their participation may have a more powerful influence than the costs. Further, corresponding with the low-cost nature of social media participation, because the costs of any social media participation are so low, differences in such low costs may not matter to the subsequent participation.

The results together indicate that the *low-cost nature* of social media activities, the origin of the term clicktivism (Lee and Hsieh 2013), may not be related to the "facilitation effect" of social media participation in enabling further engagement (Wilkins et al. 2019). Instead, *perceived benefits* of initial social media participation may act as a "steppingstone" to subsequent participation (Burger 1999; Lee and Hsieh 2013). Our findings demonstrated that

social media participation predicts greater levels of subsequent community-based participation for NPOs when it makes individuals perceive higher benefits. These findings suggest that individuals may decrease community-based participation after social media participation, not because they are easily satisfied with the low-cost social media participation (Schumann and Klein 2015), but because they are *unsatisfied* with the potential benefits resulting from their social media participation. This means that either social media participation itself or the nature of social media participation may not predict subsequent community-based participation. Whether individuals believe in efficacy and effectiveness of social media participation may be an important matter for subsequent community-based participation.

As suggested in previous studies (Wilkins et al. 2019), our empirical findings imply the need to identify conditions under which social media participation can facilitate subsequent community-based participation. The present study suggests that perceiving benefits from initial social media participation is one of the conditions that increase subsequent community-based participation. This means that social media participation can encourage community-based participation, at least under certain conditions. The debate over the effect of social media participation on subsequent community-based participation has been oversimplified because it has focused too much on technological affordances of social media participation in enabling quick and easy participation (Kristofferson et al. 2014; Morozov 2011; Wilkins et al. 2019). The present study contributes to this debate by providing evidence of the psychological circumstance in which lower-threshold actions of social media participation can stimulate meaningful participation subsequently.

Hence, future studies need to restructure the previous discussion on the facilitation effect of social media participation by developing more nuanced understandings on how individuals experience initial social media participation. In terms of examining the effect of perceived benefits, it is necessary to consider various types of benefits of initial social media participation. A previous study suggested that the effect of perceived benefits on the subsequent participation may be different depending on whether they are members of an NPO and what kind of benefits either members or non-members expect (Hornsey et al. 2006). For instance, non-members of an organization were more likely to engage in future community-based actions if they felt their action was effective in “influencing the general public” and “expressing their values.” For members of an organization, such future intention to participate was only related to the perceived effectiveness in “building an oppositional movement” for a subset of members. Even if such links between effectiveness and future intentions was

tested only in the offline context, it suggests that more nuanced operationalizations of how individuals feel about social media participation may provide useful insights into the way social media participation either facilitate or inhibit subsequent community-based participation.

Our mediation analyses (H1-1 and H2-1) suggest that issue identification may act as an indirect mechanism between perceived benefits of initial social media participation and subsequent community-based participation. Perceiving high benefits of social media participation might give meaning to individual identity related to the issue (Alberici and Milesi 2016). As individuals identify highly with the focal issue, they are more motivated to maintain their identity consistently by engaging in the subsequent community-based participation for the NPO (Garvey and Bolton 2017; Mullen and Monin 2016). Reflection on potential values of social media participation may help individuals understand what their commitment means, which may serve as a significant motivation to engage in the subsequent community-based participation. By integrating Social Identity Theory, these findings answer the call to examine indirect processes in which social media participation influences community-based participation through individuals’ cognition (Chan 2014).

Inconsistent with previous research (Gneezy et al. 2012), perceived costs of initial social media participation did not have any influence on identification with the issue. This difference implies that the mechanism of identifying with a specific value in this study (i.e., environmental issues) may differ from identifying with prosociality discussed in previous research (Gneezy et al. 2012). These findings call for more nuanced research in Social Identity Theory, specifically on varied dimensions of participation identity and viable conditions influencing such identity.

## Conclusion

This study examined the mechanisms underlying how individuals extend their social media participation for NPOs to community-based participation by analyzing the costs and benefits of the initial participation and the individuals’ identification with the focal issue. It has several limitations. First, the sample may have been more accustomed to social media participation than average because they had to know how to use social media. Second, we investigated only specific forms of participation activities. Further research may examine the relationships between various types of social media activities and community-based participation. Additionally, exploring the costs and benefits of community-based activities may enrich the theoretical understanding of initial and subsequent participation behaviors.

This research makes four contributions to research on nonprofit sector and organizations. First, this study restructures the theoretical discussion on the meaning and mechanism of social media participation for NPOs. In order to address unresolved questions about the mobilizing role of social media participation, the present study focused on psychological mechanisms of social media participation instead of the low-cost nature of social media participation (Lee and Hsieh 2013; Nekmat et al. 2015; Schumann and Klein 2015). This study suggests that how participants *perceive* the *benefits* of their participation and *identify* with the issue influences how social media participation affects community-based participation; individuals may perceive benefits from and identify with even easy and quick participation. This study calls for a greater focus on participants' psychological process during participation than ways to manage actual barriers or incentives to participation.

Second, this research reveals an interesting relationship between social media and community-based participation. The cynical view of clicktivism has argued that online and offline environments are separate and that social media participation does not extend to community-based participation in the offline environment. This study suggests that social media participation does not limit or substitute for the community-based participation. Individuals' participation may span both environments depending on the participants' psychological process. This study provides one possible answer to the controversial question of clicktivism versus a close association between the online and offline environments (Ihm 2017; Kristofferson et al. 2014; Morozov 2011).

Third, this study enriches the research on the mechanism of how individuals identify with social issues. Identifying with a social issue is an important predictor of further participation in NPOs (Alberici and Milesi 2016; Chan 2014; Postmes 2007). This study reveals one mechanism of how such identity can be triggered when individuals perceive more benefits from their participation behavior.

Finally, this study provides implications for practitioners in the nonprofit field. Because of the potential of social

media in enabling quick and easy stakeholder engagement, many NPOs have attempted to lower the barrier for the initial participation, such as asking for the click of a button (Guo and Saxton 2018; Ihm 2019; Lam and Nie 2019; Zhou and Pan 2016). This study suggests that such strategies may not be effective for increasing community-based engagement for the NPOs. NPOs may take advantage of social media fully by emphasizing the high benefits, instead of the low costs, of the participation to future participants.

The contemporary media environment both provides opportunities and poses challenges to NPOs. Advanced media technologies may reduce the actual costs of dialogic stakeholder engagement for NPOs (Guo and Saxton 2018), but the costs of extending such engagement to deeper engagement may be high. This study reveals the mechanism of how NPOs may extend stakeholder engagement on social media to community-based engagement and offers insight into the controversial meaning of social media participation (Kristofferson et al. 2014; Morozov 2011). By providing empirical evidence on the psychological mechanism between initial social media participation and subsequent community-based participation, we suggest that the meaning of social media participation does not lie in whether the click of a button is a lower-cost activity than its offline counterpart. It lies in how individuals perceive their actions, how much they appreciate the benefits from their actions, and whether they identify with the issue.

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#### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

## Appendix 1: Social Media Message



Please save our neighborhood parks!

90% of Koreans live in cities. Although we live in a city full of concrete buildings and cars, small parks in the city act as our resting places.

Urban parks have been constructed under the city management plan for the protection of urban landscape, improvement in citizen's health and emotional life, and mitigation of urban environmental pollution. In order to make urban parks legally mandatory, Korea has regulated to protect more than 6 km<sup>2</sup> of urban parks per resident in urban areas through "Article 4 of the Enforcement Rule on Urban Parks and Green Belt".

However, "Sunset Regulation of Planned Urban Facilities" which will begin in June 2020, puts the city at risk of losing valuable urban parks. The city management plan designates some privately owned sites as urban parks, but if the municipality does not purchase them, the designated effect will be canceled in June 2020. Currently, 186 km<sup>2</sup>, half of the total area of the urban park (406.5 km<sup>2</sup>) is actively used as hiking trails or parks, but most of them are privately owned. If the "Sunset Regulation of Planned Urban Facilities" is implemented, the legal effect of the urban park site will be lifted and the park area will be drastically reduced. Combined with the urban parks built on the national public land, 4421 parks in 17 metropolitan cities including Seoul, will disappear.

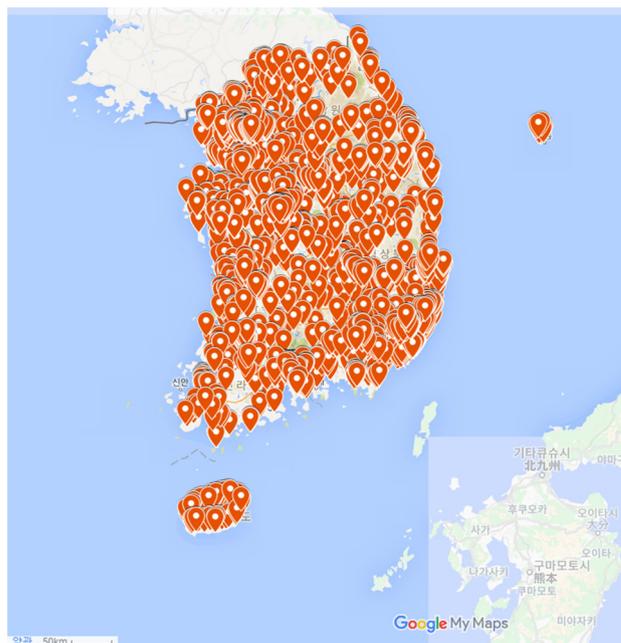
Why did the government or local governments neglect the urban park project for the benefit of its citizens?

Because of financial problems. In Seoul, it is estimated that KRW 11.7 trillion will be required to purchase 40 km<sup>2</sup> of 71 private lands subject to the Sunset Regulation of Planned Urban Facilities.

But it's not too late. If you proactively take measures from now on, you can protect the urban park. 26% of long-running non-executive urban parks by region can be excluded from sunset as a public land without any infringement of private property rights. In addition, if the urban park is privately owned, the government can support the national expenses, and if it is difficult to purchase, the policy can be supplemented by paying rent to the landowners.

We have 2 years left. We need your help in enacting legislation as countermeasures against "Sunset Regulation of Planned Urban Facilities". Please protect the lungs of the city by your power!

Link to the map with the locations of urban parks at risk: <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1NLNZYUAte9qAZjPULW2i1HCeyko7yZTb&ll=35.87224125991744%2C128.53525590000004&z=5>.



Many people do not know about the "Sunset Regulation of Planned Urban Facilities" yet.

Korean Federation for Environmental Movement is having an online petition campaign to inform the public that urban parks may disappear in the year of 2020 and prepare the legal protections for urban parks.

Use your KakaoTalk to share the online petition link (<http://www.savingparks.com>) with the above message to 1 person (low-actual cost condition)/10 people (high-actual cost condition), and upload captured screenshots.

## Appendix 2: Items of Variables

Perceived costs of social media participation ( $\alpha = .72$ )

My acquaintances and friends will participate in this action when I share this campaign with them online (reverse coded).

My acquaintance and friends will have negative reactions when I share this campaign with them online.

I wasted significant time on this participation activity.

I put much energy into this participation activity.

I felt burdened by participating in this activity.

Perceived benefits of social media participation ( $\alpha = .85$ )

This participation activity has an impact on whether the bill to protect urban parks will gain traction in the legislature.

This participation activity is not helpful in introducing the bill to protect urban parks (reverse coded).

This participation activity is helpful in shaping public opinion in favor of the bill to protect urban parks.

This participation activity is helpful in influencing government and policy makers.

This participation activity expresses the value of environmental protection.

This participation activity will impact environmental protection.

This participation activity gives me satisfaction.

Issue identification (pre:  $\alpha = .87$ ; post:  $\alpha = .84$ )

Environmental protection reflects an important part of who I am.

Environmental protection is closely connected to me.

I enjoy participating in the activities that support environmental protection.

I am reluctant to get involved in issues related to environmental protection (reverse coded).

It annoys me to talk about environmental protection (reverse coded).

I feel sad if I cannot participate in the activities for environmental protection.

I think we should protect environments.

I have not considered participating in the activities for environmental protection (reverse coded).

Participating in activities to support environmental protection means something more than mere participation to me.

Community-based participation (N/A)

Are you willing to participate in the offline volunteering activity to fold the flyers for promoting campaign to sign an online petition? (yes/no)

If yes, please specify the number of flyers you can fold.

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