

Internet Usage and Democracy Development: A Multi-Group Comparison of an Asia Tiger and a Developing Nation in Asia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the use of the Internet contributes to the growth of political activities and democratic influences, via communication for participants of political activities in Thailand, a developing nation in Asia and South Korea (SK), an Asian Tiger nation. A model is developed and data is gathered from more than 1,000 responses for each nation from the secondary database ASIAN BAROMETER (ABS). The results show significant relationships: usage of the Internet influences the development of democracy of Thailand and SK in different ways. In addition, the mediation effect of political activity (PA) on the path connecting Internet use and democracy development is partially true for SK and not true for Thailand. Further, the moderating role of communication on the path demography→Internet use is significant for Thailand but insignificant for SK. For both nations, the influence of demography on democracy development is insignificant; however, as expected, demographic variables also influence the usage of Internet in both models.

Keywords: Internet use, society, policy, democracy, communication

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the possible impact of Information Technology (IT) in general and the implicit role of the Internet in particular on the political structure of several developing nations has been debated (Times, 2012, Howard and Hussein, 2011; Mozorov, 2011). According to Nisbet, Stoycheff and Pierce (2012), greater democratization (with at least some level of democratization in a nation) and Internet penetration moderates the relationship between Internet use and demand for democracy in that nation. East Asia has shown significant progress toward economic development and democracy, but some Asian countries' governments still are restricting their citizens' communication, competitive elections, and political freedom (Chang, Chu, & Huang, 2006). These countries are still governed by authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes. Surprisingly, East Asia' economic growth sharply increased in recent times (Chu, 2006). The economic growth drives the growth of IT and the ratio of the Internet adoption that influences

political openness. The spread of IT in a society has the potential to change the power relationships between citizens, politicians, and the government. The Internet determines the roles of storytellers such as the mainstream media because citizens have more opportunities in cyberspace to access a primary source of information (Bentivegna, 2002).

Even though many researchers address the Internet revolution's impact to democracy, some questions remain empirically unaddressed. Is the Internet use associated with political activities and democracy? Does democracy influence usage of the Internet? Does demography of Internet users influence democracy? Can extensive communication influence the relationship between demography and the Internet? Are there differences in relations among variables that impact the democracy of two countries through usage of the Internet?

This study compares how the Internet directly or indirectly influences democracy via political activities for a developing democracy such as Thailand and a comparatively developed democracy such as South Korea (SK). Politically, Thailand is a constitutional monarchy whereas SK is a democracy. In economic terms, this article investigates the impact of Internet on democracy between an Asian Tiger such as SK with a developing nation such as Thailand. A few past studies investigated the impact of the Internet across national borders on democracy for developing nations including East Asian countries (Nisbet et al., 2012; Hachigian, 2003; Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Kluver et al., 2005); although these studies accessed data from various nations, they used different methodological and theoretical approaches. Also, a comparative study between various Asian nations, developed and developing that investigates the role of Internet on democracy and political development is missing. The study is a preliminary attempt in that direction.

HYPOTHESES

The Internet has contributed to regime change in Indonesia and the Philippines, and helps Chinese citizens hold their government more accountable (Hachigian, 2003). In recent times, the role of Internet in democratic movements of various developing nations has been discussed. The SK government's policies have encouraged the development of information technologies and information infrastructures and information industries (Hwang, 1999) as the usage of Internet has influenced political and social activities in SK. Democracy reflects the implicit conflict between individual freedom, equality and individual rights with collective responsibility, majority rule, the notion of a greater good and respect for authority (Bush, 2003; Mahathir, 2003; Lee, 2002). Abbott (2001) stated that libertarian supporters of the Internet believe that the medium is a universal space allowing access to unfiltered flows of information, which lacks established hierarchies of power and that, is highly democratic world with no overlords or gatekeepers. New communication technologies are being implemented in areas which provide citizens opportunities under the banner of "social, cultural and political benefits", e.g. public information services, education and electronic democracy (Malina & Jankowski, 1998, p36). The developing democracy improves people's political interests and encourages participation in political activities through the usage of the Internet.

H1: The development of democracy is influenced by the usage of Internet.

McLeod and Scheufele (1999) described that the role of community integration as well as mass and interpersonal communication in providing the infrastructure and psychological determinants necessary for political participation. Political participants with usage of the Internet have opportunities to answer public questions and discuss their views or ideas with others.

The impact of the use of Internet on democracy can thus be influenced by political activities within a nation. As Peter (2000) shows, recent communication tools such as the Internet has the potential to revolutionize political activity far more profoundly than the telephone or television. Thailand's political parties offer varied information to their political activities on their websites, even though there is little evidence to indicate that political parties of that nation are using the Internet to interact with potential supporters or in other innovative ways. A developing democracy could be influenced by political activities with the usage of the Internet. The Internet often empowers dissent and threatens regimes by giving citizens access to information and a platform for discussion (Hachigian, 2003). The Internet and IT are thus instruments that enable users to disseminate their opinions, political inclination, and other ideas. SK represents an interesting case because of its extremely high Internet penetration rate and its young democracy (Daniel & Laurel, 2007). The penetration of the Internet in SK is usually seen as a positive development for democracy (Kim, 2008). The high utilization rate of the Internet in SK thus influences tremendously the online political communication and political activities for the development and sustenance of democracy of SK.

H2: Political activities (PA) mediate the relationship between the usage influence of the Internet and democracy development.

This article also studies moderation effect of communication between demography and usage of the Internet. Growing communication among young, educated people leads to higher usage of the Internet. According to The Internet Coaching Library, the Internet growth rate of Thailand from 2010 to early 2011 is 10.2% (Thailand Internet Usage & Telecommunication, 2011) which is quite strong. For SK, Statista (2011) reported that 78% of the population had accessed the Internet in 2011. For instance, the 2002 presidential election, recorded 60% of the Internet penetration, accelerated the use of the Internet devices. SK's high internet penetration rate brought citizens' voluntary participation.

H3: Extensive communication moderates the relation between demographics of users and the usage of Internet.

Demographics may influence in developing democracy in a nation. Young, educated people have participated more in the development of democracy in many nations as Arab Spring and other recent political developments in many nations show. Demographic characteristics also influence judgments of media credibility and this applies to the Internet. Demographic and motivation factors are associated with Internet usage (Teo, 2001). The Internet phenomenon examined the role of demographics (Hoffman, Kalsbeek, & Novak, 1996; Pitkow & Kehoe, 1996), and other studies investigated a wide variety of factors influencing computer adoption and usage such as demographic characteristics (Brancheau & Wetherbe, 1990; Thong, 1999).

H4: Demographic characteristics influence democracy development.

H5: Demographic characteristics influence development and the usage of Internet.

The overall model is shown in Figures 1 and 2 for the two nations.

DATA AND METHOD

The data used in this paper is based on ASIAN BAROMETER SURVEY (ABS) conducted in Thailand in year 2007 and in SK in year 2006. The sample size for each nation was more than 1000. It can be mentioned that the data from ABS has been used in many previous academic research articles (ABS, 2012). The communication construct was measured by the following questions:

- I often communicate with people in other countries via the internet or e-mail
- I contribute to my local community or to society

The Demographics construct was measured with three items: income, age and education.

The usage of Internet was measured by the questions:

- How often do you read or write e-mails by computers?
- How often do you view Internet web pages by computers?

The development of democracy (or democracy in brief) construct was measured by the following question items:

- i) The right to vote,
- ii) The right to participate in any kind of organization,
- iii) The right to gather and demonstrate,
- iv) The right to be informed about the work and functions of government and
- v) Freedom of speech.

Political activities construct (PA) was measured by the following question items:

- i) Attending lawful demonstrations,
- ii) Citizens have a duty to vote in elections and
- iii) There is widespread corruption among those who govern the country

The developed research model is run by WarpPLS software version 2.0. WarpPLS provides regression technique based on structure equation model (SEM) that is a second generation statistical method that allows for the simultaneous assessment of multiple independent and dependent constructs including multi-step paths (Gebaner & Kline, 2011. p56). It provides direct and indirect paths analysis and latent analysis as well as produces loadings between items and constructs (similar to principal components analysis) and standardized regression coefficients between constructs (Compeau and Higgins, 1999).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic characteristics showed that two countries have similar demographic pattern as used in data samples from two nations. The PLS analysis showed that convergent and discriminant validity of the model hold for both nations, Thailand and SK. We next discuss the structural validity of the models as shown in figures 1 and 2. In each figure, the path coefficients and their significances are depicted. Figures 1 and 2 show that some paths in each model are similar and other paths are different in statistical significance. To start with, the association

between the use of Internet and democracy is positive and significant for SK but is negative and significant for Thailand (H1). The inverse relationship for H1 in Thailand could be partly due to the present constitutional monarchy political structure in Thailand. This result needs further exploration. The mediation effect of PA on the path Internet use and democracy (H2) is next examined. The results demonstrate that for SK, Internet usage influence directly affects the democracy (path coefficient = 0.10, $p < .01$) and paths from Internet use to PA (path coefficient = 0.11, $p < .01$) and PA to democracy (path coefficient = 0.13, $p < .01$) are also significant. Thus for SK, only partial mediation of PA can be seen. This finding shows that certain kind of Internet usage influence in SK can facilitate PA which can also ensure the progress of democracy. The situation is different for Thailand. In this case, Internet usage influence inversely affects the democracy (path coefficient = -0.05, $p < .05$) and the paths from Internet use to PA (path coefficient = 0.09) is insignificant (contrary to our expectation) whereas the path from PA to democracy (path coefficient = 0.10, $p < .01$) is also significant. For Thailand, the usage influence of Internet is not associated with the PA and Internet use is associated negatively with democracy. Thus H2 holds partially for SK and does not hold for Thailand.

Next the moderating role of communication on the path demography \rightarrow Internet use is found to be significant for Thailand but insignificant for SK. So H3 holds for Thailand, but not for SK. It could be that in SK, communication flow does not make a difference between older, less educated and less affluent people and young, higher educated and affluent people, due to better Internet use of all people resulting from an overall economic affluence in SK. In both models, the influence of demography on democracy is insignificant (H4). Demography also influences the usage of Internet in both models (H5). The multi-group analysis conducted in PLS (Kock, 2012) also showed that the models have paths with statistical differences. The difference in results for the two nations could be further due to difference in national culture for example, as culture is created, shaped, transmitted, and learned through communication (Hofstede, 2004; Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2009; Kahn & Kellner, 2007; and David, 1999). More research is needed to explore this.

CONCLUSION

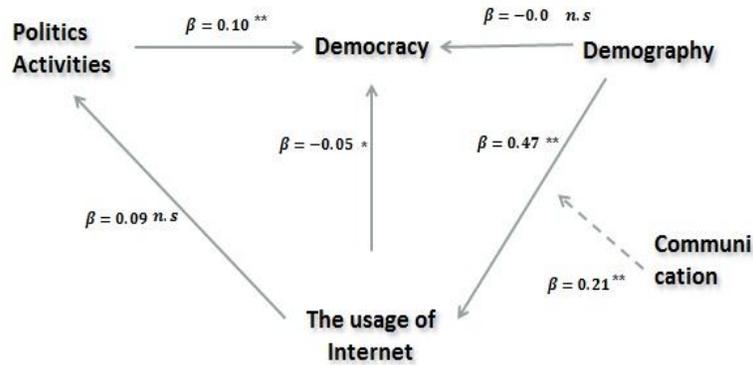
This preliminary investigation uses secondary data from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) database. Secondary data contains information that is either not available or is only available in insufficient quantities and qualities. Secondary data also sometimes show low accuracy and reliability. In spite of this limitation, the article contributes to the existing research in several ways. The Internet has an intermediate function to support political activities and the development of democracy in Thailand and SK. Our results show that:

- i) The association between the use of Internet and democracy is positive and significant for SK but is negative and significant for Thailand.
- ii) The mediation effect of PA on the relationship between Internet use and democracy is partially true for SK and not true for Thailand.
- iii) The moderating role of communication on the path demography \rightarrow Internet use is significant for Thailand but insignificant for SK.
- iv) In both nations, the influence of demography on democracy is insignificant.

v) Demography also influences the usage of Internet for both nations.

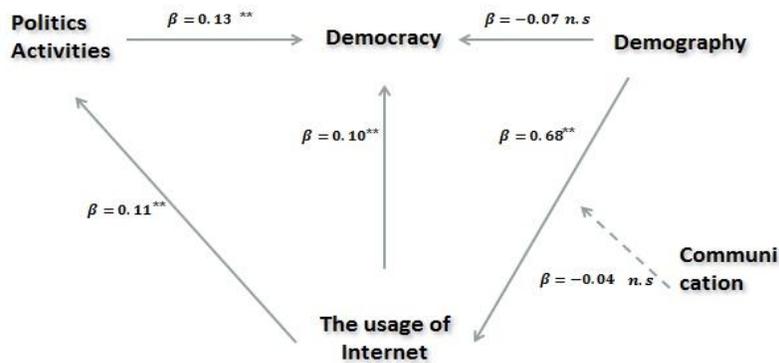
Future research will explore the possible explanations of these results with cultural, economic and political theories as well as test the model with more nations and more IT products.

Figure 1. Result of Path Analysis for Thailand



***: $P < .05$**
**** : $P < .01$**
n. s. : Not significant

Figure 2. Result of Path Analysis for SK



***: $P < .05$**
**** : $P < .01$**
n. s. : Not significant

Result of path analysis. Direct links are displayed solid lines in the model graph, and moderating links displayed a dash line.

References. Available upon request.